

NORMALIZING MIDLIFE IN THE CHURCH
FOR THE SAKE OF SPIRITUAL FORMATION

A THESIS-PROJECT
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF
GORDON-CONWELL THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY
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JANUARY 2022

To Kristen, you are a gift to me.

Thank you for being my number one encourager.

So teach us to number our days
that we may get a heart of wisdom.

-- Moses, *Psalms 90:12* *ESV*

CONTENTS

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS.....	vii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	ix
ABSTRACT.....	xi

Chapter

1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
2. BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS.....	28
3. LITERATURE REVIEW.....	83
4. PROJECT DESIGN.....	125
5. PROJECT OUTCOMES AND CONCLUSIONS.....	172

Appendix

A. PRE-TEST BASELINE QUESTIONNAIRE.....	225
B. POST-TEST FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONNAIRE.....	232
C. SERMON NOTES FOR “SPIRITUAL FORMATION AT MIDLIFE: THE OPPORTUNITY BEFORE US”	238
D. SERMON NOTES FOR “SPIRITUAL FORMATION AT MIDLIFE: WHY IT’S IMPORTANT”	250
E. SERMON NOTES FOR “SPIRITUAL FORMATION AT MIDLIFE: A MODEL FOR HOW IT HAPPENS”	262

F. SERMON NOTES FOR “SPIRITUAL FORMATION AT MIDLIFE: A STORY OF HOW IT HAPPENED”	273
G. SERMON NOTES FOR “SPIRITUAL FORMATION AT MIDLIFE: APPLYING THE GOSPEL”	286
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	303
VITA.....	307

ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure

1. Slide from February 21, 2021 Sermon, Describing Typical Spiritual Dynamics of Midlife.....133
2. Slide from February 28, 2021 Sermon, Defining What Spiritual Formation Is..... 135
3. Slide from March 7, 2021 Sermon, Depicting Janet Hagberg and Robert Guelich’s “Critical Journey” Model..... 139
4. Slide from March 7, 2021 Sermon, Describing Typical Spiritual Dynamics of Midlife, But Incorporating Janet Hagberg and Robert Guelich’s “Wall” 140
5. Slide from March 14, 2021 Sermon, Contrasting God’s Story with the Story We Cling to..... 143
6. Chart Showing Questionnaire Participants by Age Bracket..... 174
7. Chart Showing Questionnaire Participants by Racial Identity..... 175
8. Chart Showing Questionnaire Participants by Education Level.....176
9. Chart Showing Questionnaire Participants by Caregiving Role..... 177
10. Chart Showing Questionnaire Participants by Age They Began to Identify as Christian..... 178
11. Chart Showing Questionnaire Participants by How Many Sermons They Listened to..... 178

Table

1. Change in Participants' Perception of the Church's Posture towards Midlife Issues.....	187
2. Percent of All Participants Showing an Enhanced Understanding of Spiritual Formation at Midlife, with Degree of Enhancement.....	201
3. Sample of Responses to the Question, "Did Anything Change in You Spiritually Because of the Sermon Series? If So, What Was It?"	206
4. Those Who Did Not Find the Series Relevant or Did Not "Learn from the Series" Seem to Engage More in Spiritual Formation Practices both Before and After the Sermon Series.....	210
5. Research Findings for the Four Hypothesis-Driven Questions.....	216

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I owe a debt of gratitude to Professors David Currie and Steve Macchia for their guidance and encouragement throughout my DMin studies, research, and writing. I count it a privilege to have been shaped by their leadership, counsel, kindness, wisdom, and godliness.

I give thanks to the elders and people of City Line Church, for granting me not only the time and space to pursue a DMin, but also for calling me to be their pastor and allowing me to see and participate in the work of God in their lives. A special thanks goes to all those City Liners who contributed to the research portion of this thesis-project – answering questionnaires, listening to sermons, and joining in the conversation. Thank you!

I am also grateful to Tuck Bartholomew and David Skeel, not only for their input on earlier drafts of my research and writing, but also for their friendship and mentorship. I am a better pastor and child of the Father because of them.

Scott Reist and Alan Wong were also there in the process, with both encouraging words and hard questions that pushed me deeper into the research. Their keen insight helped me to get out of my own thought world and gain a broader perspective. This is a better thesis-project because of them.

Don Kim, Felix Chen, and Chun Lai were there at the genesis of this thesis-project – my 40th birthday, when it first dawned on me, “I am solidly in midlife now!” Don in particular was the first to point me to Richard Rohr’s *Falling Upward*, even before I knew that I needed to read it. A delicious fish, after spitting out the bones.

And of course, of all the people in my life, it is my wife and children who have been with me (and suffered!) the most through the research and writing process. For the countless hours of listening to me ramble on about spiritual formation and midlife issues, and for the even more hours that you put up with me having my nose in a book or my eyes on a screen, words cannot express how grateful I am. Kristen, Zoë, Eli, and Ezra, I can only hope that the time I spent away from you to work on this thesis-project was worth it. I can only hope that I am becoming a more Spirit-ually formed husband and father, who will love you more deeply and more like Christ through my midlife years and beyond.

And finally, ultimate praise and thanksgiving goes to God my Father and to Jesus Christ my Lord and to the Holy Spirit my Counselor for loving me, making me, saving me, forming me, and giving me a hope for the years to come.

ABSTRACT

Many American churches have ministries dedicated to the earlier life stages of childhood, adolescence, and young adult. Some will even have later life stage ministries for the retired and elderly. But hardly any have a dedicated ministry for those in midlife. And yet, what this thesis-project shows is that the midlife years are highly important years, and especially for spiritual formation. Using research gleaned from a small multi-ethnic church near Philadelphia, this thesis-project concludes that by normalizing *awareness* about midlife and normalizing *ministry* to those in midlife, the church can help the midlife years become a season of spiritual formation.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The Midlife Problem

There are many models for human development. Erik Erikson proposed eight stages of life in his model.¹ Carl Jung had three.² Thomas Armstrong suggests there are twelve.³ Despite their differences, what many of these models have in common is a discernible midpoint that separates the first and second halves of life, or a middle stage that sits between young adulthood and late adulthood. In its most literal sense, the term “midlife” refers to that midpoint or that middle stage.

But the word “midlife” also carries with it associations and connotations. The rest of this section will explore what those might be, before landing on what is actually definitive for midlife.

1. Erickson’s eight stages are: infancy, early childhood, play age, school age, adolescence, young adulthood, middle adulthood, and late adulthood (old age). Gabriel A. Orenstein and Lindsay Lewis, “Eriksons Stages of Psychosocial Development,” *StatPearls*, November 22, 2020, <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK556096/>.

2. “In his essay ‘Stages of Life,’ C. G. Jung separated human psychological development into three stages: childhood, the first half of life, and the second half of life.” Satya Doyle Byock, “The Inner World of the First Half of Life: Analytical Psychology’s Forgotten Developmental Stage,” *Psychological Perspectives* 58, no. 4 (October 2, 2015): 399.

3. See Thomas Armstrong, *The Human Odyssey: Navigating the Twelve Stages of Life* (Mineola, New York: Ixia Press, 2019).

Midlife as Associated with Age

Unsurprisingly, the term “midlife” is commonly associated with a certain chronological age. For some, that exact age is 40.⁴ For most, however, midlife is not an exact age, but an age *range*. Some say from 43 to 62.⁵ Others say “roughly between the ages of 40 and 65.”⁶

Midlife as Associated with External Circumstances and Difficulties

But more than just chronological age, the term “midlife” is also associated with a certain set of external circumstances and difficulties. It is that stage of life characterized by the “death of invincibility” – when physical health and even cognitive ability can no longer be taken for granted.⁷ It is that stage of life characterized by various difficulties in one’s relationships. For example, there can be the gradual loss of friends as work and family commitments crowd out time for anything else, especially among men.⁸ There can be the slow-drip erosion of marital

4. Pamela Druckerman, “How to Survive Your 40s,” *New York Times*, May 4, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/04/opinion/sunday/how-to-survive-your-40s.html>. Also, “I remember now that the toughest birthday I ever faced was my fortieth. It was a big symbol because it said good-bye, good-bye, and good-bye to youth.” Bob P. Buford, *Halftime: Moving from Success to Significance*, 20th anniversary ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), 37. Buford is quoting Norman Corwin.

5. Carlo Strenger and Arie Ruttenberg, “The Existential Necessity of Midlife Change,” *Harvard Business Review*, February 2008, <https://hbr.org/2008/02/the-existential-necessity-of-midlife-change>.

6. Barbara Bradley Hagerty, *Life Reimagined: The Science, Art, and Opportunity of Midlife* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2016), 8.

7. Paul David Tripp, *Lost in the Middle: Midlife and the Grace of God* (Wapwallopen, PA: Shepherd Press, 2004), 75.

8. “Middle age itself is a centrifugal force, mentally, physically, and emotionally draining.... [M]aintaining close emotional ties with people who do not share our home or DNA is difficult, and rare. Often I tell people (particularly men) that I am writing a chapter on the importance of midlife friends, they respond: ‘Huh, that’s interesting. I don’t think I have any friends.’” Hagerty, *Life Reimagined*, 105. See also Jim Conway, *Men in Midlife Crisis*, rev. ed. (Colorado Springs, CO: David C Cook, 1997), 309.

joy between husbands and wives, leaving increasing ennui.⁹ There can be the struggle of parenting adolescent children.¹⁰ And there can be the challenge of caring for aging parents.¹¹ Midlife is also that stage characterized by significant and sometimes tumultuous changes in one's vocation, with all the financial concerns that can accompany such tumult.¹² These are some of the external circumstances and difficulties that are often associated with midlife.

Midlife as an Internal Realization

Internally, however, what happens at midlife is a *realization* – the realization of one's mortality. To clarify, this is not a realization of one's *imminent* mortality or necessarily about a fear of dying; rather, it is about a profound awareness that while there still may be many days left in one's life, those days are limited. And it is this internal realization that gives existential meaning to the term "midlife." For one cannot speak meaningfully of a midpoint without first recognizing an endpoint. And so it is only when the future prospect of one's own endpoint (death) becomes real that the present awareness of the midpoint – or the mid-range – also

9. "Everyone who just got married is psyched about it. It's a new adventure they're embarking on with their best friend forever. Everyone who has been married for 50 years or more is psyched about it. They're living with their oldest friend, it's been a trip, totally worth it. But the people in the middle, they're, well – you know, they're *fine*." Belinda Luscombe, "Where Even the Best Marriages Are Hard: in the Middle," *Time Magazine*, February 19, 2018, 15.

10. Conway, *Men in Midlife Crisis*, 270–1. See also Eugene H. Peterson, *Like Dew Your Youth: Growing Up with Your Teenager*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 3.

11. "In midlife a man is likely to have a great deal of anxiety about his responsibility for his aging parents." Conway, *Men in Midlife Crisis*, 275.

12. "As life expectancy increases, changes in middle age will become an existential necessity for many businesspeople. Some of these changes will be internally driven. Executives may feel that their work is no longer satisfying and that they want new challenges, for instance, or they may decide that it's time to branch out. Other midlife changes will be triggered by external events: A CEO may face an irresolvable conflict with the board of directors; an executive may fear being fired; a manager may have been passed over for promotion and think that his chances of ever reaching the next level are slim." Strenger and Ruttenberg, "The Existential Necessity of Midlife Change."

becomes real. Perhaps this explains why Elliott Jacques, the Canadian psychoanalyst who coined the term “midlife crisis” in 1965, wrote that at midlife, “we come face-to-face with our limitations, our restricted possibilities, and our mortality.”¹³ Pamela Druckerman, who writes for the *New York Times*, describes the midlife realization this way: “[T]here’s a new immediacy to the 40s — and an awareness of death — that didn’t exist before. Our possibilities feel more finite. All choices now plainly exclude others.”¹⁴ People existentially *feel* that they have entered midlife when they do not simply know, but profoundly *realize*, that their days are limited.¹⁵

This internal midlife realization of one’s mortality plays out in a couple of ways. The first way is disappointment. The person at midlife looks up the ladder that he or she wishes to climb – whether that be a ladder of career accomplishment or building a certain kind of family or attaining to a degree of status – and realizes that he or she will likely not have enough time to get to the top. As journalist Barbara Bradley Hagerty describes it: “[at midlife] a man begins to glimpse the slanting shadow of death and recognizes that he would be dust long before he could fulfill the dreams of his youth.”¹⁶ The midlife person is experienced enough to reliably estimate how long it takes to climb the various rungs of the ladder, but now this person also

13. Quoted in Strenger and Ruttenberg, “The Existential Necessity of Midlife Change.”

14. Druckerman, “How to Survive Your 40s.”

15. “A mid-life crisis may not be a diagnosable condition like pneumonia or diabetes. It may not be a condition that everyone experiences or that everyone experiences in the same way. But that doesn’t make it any less real. It describes a genuine and common phenomenon—a sense of despair or depression that settles over people as they realize that their lives are already half gone, that they are closer to the grave than the cradle.” Tim Challies, “The Coming Millennial Midlife Crisis,” *Challies* (blog), June 26, 2019, <https://www.challies.com/articles/the-coming-millennial-midlife-crisis/>.

16. Hagerty, *Life Reimagined*, 17.

realizes that he or she – in all likelihood – won’t be alive long enough to climb them all.¹⁷ And since the ladder in question is not something trivial but about life aspirations, this realization is deeply disappointing.

The second way is dissatisfaction. In this case, the person at midlife has been able to climb the ladder that’s important to him or her. But there at the top, he or she discovers that it’s less satisfying than expected.¹⁸ While being dissatisfied with success is not necessarily unique to midlife, the midlife realization of one’s mortality does add a unique poignancy. When a person is keenly aware that his or her days are limited, the need to find satisfaction as soon as possible dramatically increases. In younger days – when the future seems limitless – any dissatisfaction can be readily shrugged off and left behind by pursuing the next attempt at success and its satisfaction. But at midlife – when one can realize that there are only a limited number of new pursuits – each bout of dissatisfaction becomes that much more difficult to shrug off. What’s more, realizing one’s mortality can also greatly mitigate any joy that someone might derive from success. To quote Ecclesiastes, it all begins to feel like “vanity” and a “striving after the wind.”¹⁹

17. “Dr. van den Haag points out that the difference between the crisis in the teenage boy and in the midlife man is that the teen has not tested his abilities and is looking forward to the future with optimism, expecting his fantasies to be fulfilled. ‘When you have reached middle age, if you are realistic, you see the limitations of your career. And that is for most people rather difficult to take.’” Conway, *Men in Midlife Crisis*, 38.

18. “Even the fortunate ones who have achieved a measure of success, popularity, and security by midlife are vulnerable to this experience. Suddenly, everything seems stale.” Rosemarie Carfagna, *Contemplation and Midlife Crisis: Examples from Classical and Contemporary Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 2008), 24.

19. Eccl 1:17. All scripture references are taken from the *English Standard Version* of the Bible unless otherwise indicated.

Either way – whether disappointment or dissatisfaction – the effect is to leave the midlife person quite disillusioned about his or her future:

As we age, things often don't turn out as nicely as we planned. We may not climb up the career ladder as quickly as we wished. Or we do, only to find that prestige and a high income are not as satisfying as we expected them to be. At the same time, high expectations about the future adjust downwards. Midlife essentially becomes a time of double misery, made up of disappointments and evaporating aspirations.²⁰

Disappointment and dissatisfaction – both of which can lead to disillusionment – are oftentimes the unfortunate outflow of that midlife realization that one's days are limited.

Internal Realization as What Defines Midlife

The internal realization of mortality is what fundamentally defines midlife; all the other understandings of midlife mentioned above can only be approximations. For example, while midlife can certainly be *associated* with an age or age range, there is no magical midlife age. As noted above, there are differing opinions on what even the exact age range should be. And while the realization of one's mortality often does happen between the ages of 40 and 65, it is certainly not guaranteed nor determinative. What's more, there is nothing anyone can do about chronological aging. So while it is commonplace and understandable to refer to midlife as an age range, doing so by itself does not offer any direction for how one might minister to those in midlife.

What's more, while midlife can also be associated with a set of external circumstances and difficulties, that too can only be an approximation. This is because the external difficulties

20. Hannes Schwandt, "Why So Many of Us Experience a Midlife Crisis," *Harvard Business Review*, April 20, 2015, <https://hbr.org/2015/04/why-so-many-of-us-experience-a-midlife-crisis>. "Maybe he realizes that he's not going to meet all his goals, or perhaps he has met them and says, 'So what?'" Conway, *Men in Midlife Crisis*, 34.

of a health crisis or a relationship crisis or a vocational crisis can happen to anyone at any stage in life, not just at midlife. Likewise, the internal midlife realization – and its attending disappointment, dissatisfaction, and disillusionment – can happen to someone regardless of his or her external circumstances. Circumstantially, everything could be fine, but the midlifer is still disappointed because things aren't better. In fact, everything could be great, but the midlifer is still dissatisfied.²¹ External circumstances and difficulties, then, cannot define what it means to be in midlife.²² And so while offering counsel to address those externals (e.g. advice for struggling marriages, tips for managing chronic pain, guidance on making a career change, etc.) can be helpful, that kind of counsel by itself will not minister to the deeper and internal issue of realizing one's own mortality. To understand midlife as simply a set of external circumstances and difficulties would then shortchange those efforts that *do* directly address the fundamental issue of midlife realization.

With that said, there can still be a causal relationship between the two. Though midlife is fundamentally defined by the internal realization that one's days are limited, the external circumstances and difficulties associated with midlife can *trigger* such a realization. For example, a health scare or the death of a close friend may be a catalyst for realizing one's own

21. What's more, those who struggle with dissatisfaction after having climbed to the top are even further dissatisfied with themselves for feeling dissatisfied: "Paradoxically, those who objectively have the least reason to complain (e.g. if they have a desirable job) often suffer most. They feel ungrateful and disappointed with themselves particularly because their discontent seems so unjustified – which creates a potentially vicious circle." Schwandt, "Why So Many of Us Experience a Midlife Crisis."

22. "The difficult disorientation of midlife is not because the passage itself is disorienting. Whatever trouble midlife brings to us is essentially caused by the wrong thinking we bring to it." Tripp, *Lost in the Middle*, 33.

mortality.²³ “Suddenly, during midlife some event or thought causes us to realize that death is going to happen to us.”²⁴

And then from the other angle, those external circumstances and difficulties associated with midlife can be a *result* of the internal midlife realization. The profound awareness of one’s mortality can drown someone in so much disappointment and dissatisfaction that “it seems from forty on, it’s all downhill.”²⁵ This dismal outlook can then result in poor decision-making – for example, dealing with disappointment “by acquiring things that we think will satisfy us,” or by numbing ourselves “with excessive pursuit of leisure or pleasure.”²⁶ In addition to poor decision-making, there can also be brash decision-making:

The man at midlife seems to be concerned with the *now*. When he looks to the future, he only sees old age creeping in on him and the inevitability of death. He fears losing his job, his productivity, influence, impact, and life itself. When he looks to the past, he sees only a long list of unfulfilled goals and dreams, so he desperately, almost in a panic, wants to live life *now*.²⁷

These two together – poor decision-making and brash decision-making – can then combine with toxic effect on one’s relationships (e.g. an affair), one’s health (e.g. substance abuse), and one’s vocation (e.g. a foolish career change).²⁸ This all feeds into that cliché of a middle-aged

23. “These triggers can happen at any time, but they tend to frequent middle age. Aside from the ‘crisis of conscience’ and ‘end of the line,’ she finds people leave because of burnout; ‘that nagging feeling’ that has you wondering, *Is this all there is?*; a loss or crisis (a death, divorce illness) that suddenly shifts your perspective; and ‘a dream deferred.’” Hagerty, *Life Reimagined*, 319.

24. Conway, *Men in Midlife Crisis*, 293.

25. Conway, *Men in Midlife Crisis*, 25.

26. Tripp, *Lost in the Middle*, 41.

27. Conway, *Men in Midlife Crisis*, 37.

28. See Conway, *Men in Midlife Crisis*, 19-20. Also Tripp, *Lost in the Middle*, 27–31. Also Jonathan Rauch, *The Happiness Curve: Why Life Gets Better After 50* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2018), 62–4.

man quitting his job and leaving his family for a younger woman, driving away in a red sports car.

Fortunately, these poor and brash choices are the rarer result of midlife realization.²⁹

More common is what Bob Buford in his book *Halftime* describes as “sleepwalking”:

It is not unnatural nor should it overly concern you that you feel the need for a change. The mistake most people make when they begin to feel this way is to ignore the voice that is telling them to stop and listen. And there are many ways to ignore it. Some simply bear down, reasoning that they need more discipline, more focus. Some turn to diversions, both healthy and reckless. Most, I am convinced, enter a sort of sleepwalking stage during which they force themselves to hold on until retirement.³⁰

There is a range, then, of external circumstances and difficulties that can not only trigger the internal midlife realization, but can also be the result of that internal midlife realization.

And yet, these external circumstances and difficulties are not themselves what define midlife. Rather, it is the internal realization of one’s mortality; the realization that one’s days are limited. To address and give counsel to that realization, then, is to directly address and give counsel to what fundamentally defines midlife.

In sum, the term “midlife” refers to that stage of life between young adulthood and late adulthood. The “midlifer,” then, is someone who is in that stage of life. Associated with midlife is a chronological age range – the “midlife years.” Also associated with midlife are “external circumstances and difficulties.” But it is only the “internal midlife realization” – that profound awareness of one’s mortality – that fundamentally defines that stage of life.

29. “Another common life-satisfaction pattern is the V-shaped curve. It is rarer than either the U or the upward-sloping line – mercifully so, because it’s the pattern characterized by a disruptive breakdown or an acute crisis rather than a chronic malaise.” Rauch, *The Happiness Curve*, 62.

30. Buford, *Halftime*, 67.

The Midlife Opportunity for Spiritual Formation

Despite all the problems that come with midlife, it is a stage of life that is full of opportunity... and specifically, opportunity for spiritual formation.³¹

Two Angles for Understanding Spiritual Formation

The term “spiritual formation” can be understood from a couple different angles. From one angle, spiritual formation is about the spirit of a person being formed. People are both body and spirit, and similar to how a body can be strengthened or toned, so a person’s spirit can also be formed. From this angle, spiritual formation is about the formation of a person’s spirit.

From another angle, spiritual formation is about the work of the *Holy Spirit* to form a person’s spirit. It is not just that people make choices that form their own spirits, but ultimately it is the Holy Spirit who forms a person’s spirit. The Holy Spirit is able to raise a spiritually dead person into Christ’s resurrection life.³² He is able to give sight to a spiritually blind person to see Christ’s glorious truth.³³ He is able to reassure a spiritually dejected person with Christ’s unfailing love.³⁴ And he is able to transform those who have marred the image of God within them to become the very image of Christ.³⁵ But it is not simply that the Holy Spirit is *able* to do

31. Jonathan Rauch says virtually the same thing, only from a secular perspective: “[Midlife] is not mere transient change in mood: it is a change in our values and sources of satisfaction, a change in *who we are*.” Rauch, *The Happiness Curve*, 18.

32. See Rom 8:11.

33. See 1 Cor 2:14-5.

34. See Eph 3:14-19.

35. See 2 Cor 3:18.

these things; rather, these are his *primary* work: “The central role of the Spirit is to reveal Christ and to unite us to him and to all those who participate in his body.... “[T]o sustain us ‘in Christ’ (an expression which, with its variants, Paul uses around 160 times) is the heart and soul of the Spirit’s ministry.”³⁶

Chapter 2 of this thesis-project will explore in greater depth the topic of spiritual formation from both angles.

The Possibility of Spiritual Formation during Midlife

Given what has already been said above, there is no reason to believe that either angle of spiritual formation should be missing during midlife. Indeed, theologically-speaking, there is no reason to believe that a person’s spirit ceases to be formed or that the Holy Spirit ceases to be at work at *any* stage of a person’s life. In fact, scripturally, it would seem that the opposite is true. For the prophecy in Joel chapter 2 – that is then reiterated in Acts chapter 2 – suggests that the Spirit’s work is for every stage of life: “your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions.”³⁷ There is every reason to believe, then, that spiritual formation can happen during midlife.

And existentially-speaking, spiritual formation *should* be happening at midlife, especially when we consider that what fundamentally defines midlife are not external circumstances and difficulties, but the internal realization of one’s mortality. The deepest questions of midlife are not about exercise techniques or career changes or even marital happiness; they are questions

36. Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1996), 100.

37. Joel 2:28.

about dreams and limitations, about hopes and disappointments, about desire and dissatisfaction. These questions are deeply spiritual questions. And thus they are the kinds of questions that open up a person to the Spirit's formative response.

The Challenge of Spiritual Formation during Midlife

Spiritual formation during midlife, however, is not a given. As Bob Buford noted above, one can shortchange the opportunity of midlife by trying to ignore that the stage even exists, or by sleepwalking through it, or by surrounding oneself with diversions during it.

And then there are those for whom the problems of midlife are so overwhelming that it stymies their spiritual formation. For example, realizing one's mortality – and the disappointment and dissatisfaction that come with it – can tempt someone to blame God: "Why are all these troubles and frustrations coming to his life? God must be dead – or he is so inept he can't provide positive solutions for midlife."³⁸ And then this can lead someone to push God away, deciding to "solve his problems by isolating himself from others – including God."³⁹ That same person could just as well blame themselves: "The idle word, the impulsive choice, or the wayward desires all cause you regret. You wish you could take back choices... but you cannot."⁴⁰ And then like Adam and Eve just after the Fall, this too can lead to pushing God away – hiding from him out of a deep sense of shame. This self-blame, of course, may be

38. Conway, *Men in Midlife Crisis*, 142.

39. Conway, *Men in Midlife Crisis*, 144.

40. Tripp, *Lost in the Middle*, 108.

justified; indeed, the self-reflection that often occurs at midlife will likely expose past sins.⁴¹

But either way – whether blaming God or blaming self – the result can be a deep disillusionment with God: “For the first time, our faith does not seem to work.... Many simply want to give up. Their life of faith may seem to have been a fraud at worst, a mirage at best.”⁴²

In all these ways, spiritual formation – having one’s spirit be formed by God’s Holy Spirit – is not a given at midlife.

The Opportunity for Spiritual Formation during Midlife

And yet, it is precisely the challenge of midlife that make it such a significant opportunity for spiritual formation. It could be said of *all* types of challenges – indeed, all types of suffering – that God redeems them for our good.⁴³ But it would seem that the challenge of midlife is *especially* suited for spiritual formation, for what fundamentally defines midlife is that realization of one’s limitedness. And thus while other challenges open the door for human solutions that need only human strength and human wisdom, the challenge of midlife closes

41. Tripp, *Lost in the Middle*, 106.

42. Janet O. Hagberg and Robert A. Guelich, *The Critical Journey: Stages in the Life of Faith*, 2nd ed. (Salem, WI: Sheffield Publishing Company, 2005), 94. While Hagberg & Guelich do not address midlife directly, their description of the stages of the “critical journey” has a good deal of similarities.

43. “Union with Jesus who suffered, died, and rose again gives us a framework within which to understand our lives. In Jesus, suffering, even totally undeserved suffering, is redeemed.... The resurrection of Jesus points the way to the ultimate resolution of all struggles.” Carfagna, *Contemplation and Midlife Crisis*, 116.

that door. While this could drive midlifers to despair, it could also drive them back to God:

Spiritually, the most difficult and the most fulfilling experiences await us. As the complexities of midlife throw us back on ourselves, we begin to comprehend our inability to solve them entirely on our own. We realized vividly our need for God, our total dependence on God... Both midlife crisis and spiritual maturity call for more being than doing. Both reveal the inadequacies of our active striving.⁴⁴

Similarly, Carolyn Gratton reasons that “the mid-life crisis may be the moment of opening to spiritual maturity,” for it “involves an opening of self to the pneumatic dimension, to the Holy Spirit: radical transformation, after all, cannot be brought about by merely human effort.”⁴⁵

And it is here that Paul Tripp, author of *Lost in the Middle*, finds a great deal of hope:

God is fighting for your soul. The painful regret, the disappointment of broken dreams, and the scary specter of old age are, in the hands of your Lord, the boiling pots of redemption. He is freeing your soul from bondage to your *own* righteousness, from slavery to your *own* dreams, and from false refuge in physical things that are progressively passing away.⁴⁶

God uses a person’s midlife suffering to expose the weak façade of what he or she had been idolizing, in order that he or she might turn and worship him, the one true God. Those who let go of their idols and hold more tightly to God are thus more able to receive his Spirit’s work of formation. Indeed, the Spirit’s work of formation in their lives is happening at that very moment.

44. Carfagna, *Contemplation and Midlife Crisis*, 65-6.

45. Carolyn Gratton, *The Art of Spiritual Guidance* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1992), 45-6.

46. Tripp, *Lost in the Middle*, 200. Tripp also says this more positively: “Midlife is more than a time of assessment, it is a time of refinement, where the character of God’s fullness dwells more and more in me. It is a time when I learn to celebrate the redemptive realities inside of me more than the physical, situational, and relational realities outside of me.” Tripp, *Lost in the Middle*, 347.

Thus, while the challenge of midlife can try one's faith, it is precisely that challenge that the Spirit uses to grow one's faith, and to form a person more and more into the image of Christ. In this way, midlife becomes an important opportunity for spiritual formation.

The Problem and Its Setting

The setting for this thesis-project is City Line Church. City Line is a small congregation of about 100 members (including minors) widely dispersed across the Greater Philadelphia area, with about a third of the membership residing in an urban environment, and the remaining two-thirds residing in a suburban environment.

Demographic Considerations

City Line is a multi-ethnic church, consisting of Asian-Americans (~50%), White-Americans (~45%), as well as Indian-South-Africans and a few African-Americans (~5%). Despite this ethnic diversity, however, it is mostly young families (~80%), where the parents are well-educated white-collar professionals, many of whom work in the "helping" professions of teaching and medicine.

As such, a significant number of City Liners are entering into their midlife years, and are beginning to experience some of the midlife problems mentioned above. Indeed, they may be experiencing these struggles in heightened form precisely because so many of them are well-educated white-collar professionals working in the "helping" professions. As people who are used to solving their or others' problems, it can be especially jarring as they enter into problems that are not solve-able (e.g. declining health, parenting difficulties, loved ones passing, etc.).

Cultural Considerations

The influence of surrounding American culture does not help. For decades, Americans have been taught to have great expectations for themselves. As one cultural observer puts it: “I was told by teachers and by television how unlimited my potential was if I only believe in myself.”⁴⁷ While no doubt this was all intended to be encouraging, the problem with such cultural expectations is that it heightens the risk of midlife disappointment.

For her part, Ada Calhoun notes in her book *Why We Can't Sleep* that today's midlife women especially bear the weight of cultural expectation: “[T]he context for Gen X women is this: we were an experiment in crafting a higher-achieving, more fulfilled, more well-rounded version of the American woman. In midlife many of find that the experiment is largely a failure.”⁴⁸

What's more, Tim Challies – a pastor and Christian blogger – notes that younger Millennials in America are even more at risk:

Of all generations, it's the Millennials who have had the deepest sense that it's their responsibility to save the earth, to better society, to rescue humanity. From childhood they've been told that their parents and grandparents broke this world, pillaged its resources, unbalanced its economy, and harmed its people. From grade school they've been assured it falls to them to pull it all back from the brink of destruction. They are convinced they are equal to the challenge.... With such a heightened desire to make a difference and with such a towering assessment of their abilities, the fall will be from a great height and come with crushing pain.⁴⁹

47. Jeff Reimer, “Good Birth, Good Death,” *Comment Magazine*, March 25, 2020, <https://www.cardus.ca/comment/article/good-birth-good-death/>.

48. Ada Calhoun, *Why We Can't Sleep: Women's New Midlife Crisis* (New York: Grove Press, 2020), 6.

49. Challies, “The Coming Millennial Midlife Crisis.”

While the saints of City Line Church are redeemed by God, they are nevertheless influenced by the narratives of their surrounding culture. And, as noted above, these narratives often set them up for greater disappointment, dissatisfaction, and disillusionment when the midlife realization arrives. In a group discussion with City Liners about midlife, one participant (who did not give permission to use his name) noted that while the “focus of his life” had grown out of “something great and holy,” he wonders if the disappointment and dissatisfaction he sometimes feels is the result of a “manipulation” where things have become “confused with my own ambitions or my own ideas about who I’m supposed to be.”⁵⁰

Spiritual Considerations

In terms of where they are spiritually, City Liners seems to predominantly reside in stages 2 and 3 of Hagberg and Guelich’s “critical journey” paradigm.⁵¹ There are a few newer believers who are in stage 1 (“recognition of God”), and there are a few older believers who seem to be well into stage 4 (“the journey inward”).⁵² But most are in “the life of discipleship” or “the productive life,” and are headed in one way or another towards “the Wall” – which in many ways corresponds with challenge and opportunity of midlife.⁵³

50. Anonymous participant #1, interview by author, Havertown, PA, October 10, 2018.

51. See Hagberg and Guelich, *The Critical Journey*.

52. Admittedly, I reside primarily in stages 3 and 4, so am not yet able to clearly discern if someone is in stages 5 or 6. “We cannot fully comprehend the actual day-to-day existence of people whose home stage is two stages further along on the journey.” Hagberg and Guelich, *The Critical Journey*, 12.

53. “Fundamentally, it has to do with slowly breaking through the barriers we have built between our will and a newer awareness of God in our lives. We have spent our own energy; we have come to the end of our ropes. We are ready to learn about freedom – the liberty of living without grasping. In a more profound sense than ever before, we have to ‘let God be God,’ and let God direct our lives. At the same time that we surrender our wills to be healed spiritually we simultaneously begin to be healed psychologically. The Wall experience is the place where the two, psychology and spirituality, converge. Up to this point, one can be religious, spiritual, or

Denominational Considerations

City Line is a congregation of the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) – which is Reformed in theology, Presbyterian in governance, and a subset within broader American Evangelicalism. And like many churches within American Evangelicalism, City Line has a plethora of ministries geared towards other stages in life (e.g. children’s ministry, youth ministry, college ministry, etc.), but hardly any geared towards midlife. What’s more, the Christian literature that City Liners are typically exposed to also fall within this sphere of American Evangelicalism, where there are very few resources that directly address midlife, and those that do often focus more on avoiding catastrophe or finding fulfillment (e.g. how to protect a marriage through midlife, how to find vocational meaning in midlife, etc.) and less on spiritual formation.

In sum, given their age, their life experiences, their cultural influences, and where they are spiritually, and also given their limited access to any form of midlife ministry, many at City Line Church would benefit greatly from a thesis-project that helps them experience midlife as an opportunity for spiritual formation.

fruitful *and* not be healed psychologically, or visa versa. The healing itself is mysterious and profound, for it is the soul that is healed.” Hagberg and Guelich, *The Critical Journey*, 115.

The Hypothesis

What will help City Liners understand and experience midlife as a season of spiritual formation? The hypothesis of this thesis-project is that *normalizing* midlife in the church will help it become a season of spiritual formation. There are two aspects to normalizing.

Normalizing Awareness

First, there is the aspect of awareness. This means the church recognizing midlife as a normal stage of life, similar to childhood and adolescence. This also means the church recognizing midlife as a distinct stage of life – similar to how churches normally distinguish between different stages of childhood (e.g. infant, toddler, pre-school, school-aged, etc.).⁵⁴ In both these ways, the church normalizes midlife by recognizing it in ways similar to how the church recognizes other stages of life.

This way of normalizing midlife by raising awareness is foundational to helping it become a season of spiritual formation. Greater awareness will help remove the awkwardness and stigma that can sometimes surround discussions about midlife.⁵⁵ This would then allow for more conversation about and attention to the issues related to midlife, which then enhances understanding and gives space for midlife individuals to process what they are going through.

54. Paul Tripp explains why this distinguishing is just as necessary for adults: “[There is a] remarkable difference in maturity between a person who is twenty-two and a person who is thirty-five. Emotionally, physically, spiritually, relationally, economically, and socially these two people are in very different places. To say that a person is an adult is to make an observation of such wide generality that it almost means nothing. The overgeneralized category of adult tends to ignore the fact that as human beings we are always in some kind of process of change.... We need more robust ways of thinking about human life, growth, and change...” Tripp, *Lost in the Middle*, 35.

55. Jonathan Rauch writes about his interview with a man named Karl, and quotes Karl as saying, “[Midlife crisis] is almost a punch line. Who wants to bring it up and feel like you’re walking into a joke?” Rauch, *The Happiness Curve*, 3.

And when all of this happens within the church community, it can help those in midlife to not feel so alone when they experience the problems of midlife – whether they be the external circumstances and difficulties, or that internal realization of mortality that can lead to disappointment, dissatisfaction, and disillusionment. Jim Conway, in his book *Men in Midlife Crisis*, envisions how this could happen in the church:

Over the years I have watched scores of people in midlife quietly slip out the back door of churches. Each one felt he was a failure – morally or emotionally and most of all spiritually. He had been taught all of his life that being a Christian would guarantee that no problem would ever defeat him. But when his midlife crisis hit, he was literally flattened as if in a boxing match. As he lifted his head from the canvas and staggered to his feet, he looked at the church filled with people who seemed to be so successful and arrogantly sure of themselves. He saw people with whom he was afraid to speak, people who would only compound his guilt. He saw a church speaking about forgiveness, love, and acceptance – but he didn't experience any of that. So, disillusioned, he quietly walked away to his dressing room and out into the night – away from the church.... [But as] the church grows in acceptance, talks more freely about midlife crisis... and offers genuine forgiveness to people who've failed, then some of these people will turn back to the church and find it to be a community of strength and support.⁵⁶

Foundational to helping midlife become a season of spiritual formation is understanding it and having a community of support through it.⁵⁷ But in order for this to happen, the church must first normalize midlife by raising awareness about it.

Normalizing Ministry

The second aspect of normalizing midlife in the church is ministry – which builds on the foundation of awareness. Given the greater attention to and understanding of midlife, a church

56. Conway, *Men in Midlife Crisis*, 307–8.

57. “The man in his forties also needs to be encouraged to face similar issues. People need to stand alongside in support. Encourage the man not to run from the stress, but to let the developmental process mature him for the next stage of life.” Conway, *Men in Midlife Crisis*, 69.

can then take those same categories of spiritual formation practices that it instills into people in other seasons of life, and minister them to the distinct dynamics of this stage of life. More will be said about this in chapter 2 of this thesis-project, but the typical categories of spiritual formation practices might be the study of Scripture and the practice of prayer, as well as the application of what has been learned and reflection back upon that. In the same way that a church might contextualize these practices for children or adolescents, so – to normalize things – the church would contextualize those same practices for people in midlife. And in this way, the church would minister to the distinct issues surrounding midlife – helping people come to terms with their mortality and limitation, or properly grieve and confess their disappointments and failures, or more fully surrender their desires and themselves with trust in God.

Both aspects of normalizing midlife – through awareness and through ministry – are necessary. As mentioned earlier, awareness is foundational. One cannot experience midlife as a season of spiritual formation without first being aware of being in midlife! And likewise, understanding what is happening in midlife is also crucial. But awareness by itself is not formation.⁵⁸ Thus ministry is necessary to help midlifers move from simply being aware and understanding midlife, to actually having their spirits formed by the Spirit through midlife.

Fortunately, as mentioned above, this ministry does not need to be highly specialized, only

58. “If all you had to do in midlife was to admit that you had failed along the way, or to let go of some of your dreams, or accept that you were getting older, this period of time would not be so difficult. But the biggest problems of midlife are problems of the heart.... While midlife is certainly filled with disappointment and remorse, it is vital to see it as a period of rescue and reconciliation. A jealous God is fighting for your heart. He is unwilling to share your affection and adoration. He will do what is necessary to reclaim your worship. In those moments in midlife where you feel lost and alone, you must remember that you are not alone. Much of the pain that you feel is the pain of grace. You are being freed from things that held you fast. You are being loved and taken to the one place where the deepest joy and rest can be found.” Tripp, *Lost in the Middle*, 262–3.

normalized. In the same way that a church might contextualize its ministries towards other stages of life, so all it needs to do is contextualize its ministry to those in midlife.⁵⁹

Clarifications

There are two points of clarification to make regarding the hypothesis of this thesis-project. The first is with regard to the word “normalization.” To normalize midlife in the church is to become aware that much about the stage of life is *normal* – meaning common, typical, or usual. It is common for people to enter their midlife years. It is typical for those years to have moments of external difficulties regarding health or relationships or vocation. It is usual – even defining – for the midlifer to realize his or her own mortality, and to experience the disappointment or dissatisfaction or disillusionment that comes with it. But this does not mean that everything associated with midlife is *normative* – meaning how things should be or ought to be. As noted earlier, the internal midlife realization of one’s mortality can lead to such disappointment or dissatisfaction that a midlifer makes poor or brash choices, with toxic effects. To normalize midlife in the church does not mean condoning such choices, and certainly it does not mean seeing such choices as normative. While God’s grace in Christ is more than sufficient, sin is never normative in the church. Indeed, one aspect of spiritual formation is greater repentance from such sin. What’s more, it could be that the internal midlife realization of one’s mortality – as well as the disappointment, dissatisfaction, and

59. Paul Tripp explains the reasoning for his book in much the same way: “Does everyone have a midlife crisis? Not necessarily. Just as many teenagers never have a tumultuously rebellious adolescence. Yet attending to the potential difficulties and dangers of the teen years has helped both teenagers and parents to be more prepared for it. My hope is that this book will do the same for the hordes of people who are now in, or approaching, the midyears of their adult lives.” Tripp, *Lost in the Middle*, 31.

disillusionment that often come with it – is meant to expose various idolatries (e.g. self, accomplishment, reputation). Again, while God’s grace in Christ is more than sufficient, idolatry is also never normative in the church. And indeed, another aspect of spiritual formation is turning away from idols and towards the one true God.

The second point of clarification is that the hypothesis makes no claim that normalization will *guarantee* spiritual formation through midlife. Certainly even with normalization, someone struggling with midlife could still seek out diversions and turn away from the Lord. But that is true of all life stage ministries (e.g. no college ministry would guarantee that everyone it reaches will experience spiritual formation). The hypothesis, then, is simply that normalizing midlife within the church will *help* it to become a season of spiritual formation.

The Project

To test the hypothesis, this project will implement a one-group pre-test/post-test quasi-experiment for program evaluation. The test group will be approximately twenty-five self-identified midlifers who attend City Line Church, both men and women. If it becomes difficult to recruit enough participants from this one church, then recruitment will expand to other churches similar to City Line.

The test group will participate in a program designed to normalize midlife in terms of both awareness and ministry. The curriculum for this program will utilize typical spiritual formation practices – namely, a combination of teaching, prayer, guided practice, and individual and communal reflection. The curriculum will also be contextualized for midlife,

much in the same way that other life stage ministries are contextualized for their particular life stage. Specific topics will include a theology of life stages, midlife dynamics, how the Spirit can form the believer through midlife, and how the believer might adapt spiritual formation practices for midlife.

To evaluate the program, the same questionnaire will be administered to all participants both before and after the program is implemented. The questionnaires will provide mainly quantitative data, with some qualitative data. Following that, a focus group will be used to provide more qualitative data.

Both forms of data will be analyzed to discern whether the hypothesis is validated or not. Did this program – intended to normalize midlife in the church – enhance participants’ awareness and understanding of midlife dynamics? Did this program help participants feel accompanied – not alone – in their midlife journey? Did this program enhance participants’ involvement in spiritual formation practices? And finally – the overall question – did participants experience growth in spiritual formation through this program that normalized midlife in the church?

The design, implementation, and evaluation of the project will be described in greater detail in chapter 4 of this thesis-project.

Personal Reflections

Please allow me to speak personally now. As the pastor of City Line Church, I fit very neatly into the middle of the “bell curve” of the church: I am the husband and father of a young multi-ethnic family, residing in the Greater Philadelphia area, well-educated and working

in a “helping” profession. My own midlife realization of mortality and the limitedness of my days (on my 40th birthday, no less) was what prompted my interest in this topic for my thesis-project. But the hope is that the research and conclusions drawn here will benefit and bless not only myself, but also the people I pastor, as well as those who would read this thesis-project.

Looking Ahead

The remaining chapters of this thesis-project will expand on many of the topics introduced in this chapter. What follows is a brief overview of what is to come.

Chapter 2: Biblical and Theological Foundations

Chapter 2 will lay out the biblical and theological foundations for the hypothesis that normalizing midlife in the church will help it to become a season of spiritual formation. There will be three sections to this chapter, with each one focusing on different parts of the hypothesis. The first section will provide a theology of spiritual formation – what it is, why it’s important, and how believers can join the Spirit in his forming work. The second section of this chapter will lay out a theology of life stages, referencing both contemporary wisdom and the Scriptures. While the main focus of this thesis-project is midlife, it will still be instructive to understand the other stages of life in which midlife fits. And then having laid out a theology of life stages in general, the third section of this chapter will explore a theology of midlife in particular. How do the Scriptures both normalize midlife and address the distinct issues of midlife?

Chapter 3: Literature Review

Chapter 3 will be a literature review that presents four groups of conversation partners, as well as the distinct contributions they each make to the topic of midlife: secular journals and books tend to be more data-driven and well-researched; Roman Catholic and contemplative authors do well in emphasizing the importance of spiritual formation; works that are broadly Evangelical focus on behavioral change; and sources that are more particularly Reformed Evangelical are well-grounded in their theological reflection.⁶⁰ This chapter will then explore how each of these four groups interacts with the following questions: What is happening in midlife? How does one journey well through midlife? And what can help and support those who journey through midlife? A conclusion that will come out of this literature review is that there is a need for more Reformed Evangelical writing on this topic.

Chapter 4: The Project

Chapter 4 will discuss the project itself. As mentioned earlier, to test the hypothesis, the project will be a one-group pre-test/post-test quasi-experiment for program evaluation. This chapter will go into detail about how the program is designed and implemented to normalize midlife in terms of awareness and ministry. This chapter will also discuss program evaluation. How will the pre-test questionnaire be administered to the test group at the start of the program? How will the same questionnaire then be administered post-test? What questions will be posed to program participants? How will their responses be compared and

60. Scholarly works in psychology will not be included in this review primarily because it is not a set of literature that City Liners would typically read. The focus of this literature review will be on the “voices” that are most likely to influence and inform – and be interesting – to the test group.

analyzed? And then how will this analysis be presented at the final focus group so that the test group can discuss why and how the curriculum was (or was not) effective for them?

Chapter 5: Outcomes

The final chapter – chapter 5 – will discuss outcomes. It will present the data gathered from the questionnaires and the focus group, and discuss whether the program achieved its goals for the test group. The data will then be analyzed to draw conclusions about the hypothesis of this thesis-project: did normalizing midlife in terms of awareness and ministry (i.e. talking about midlife and ministering to midlife people to the same degree a church might minister to people in other seasons of life) help people experience midlife as a season of spiritual formation? It is expected that the hypothesis will be supported, with some qualifications. This chapter will then conclude with recommendations on how churches might serve and care better for the midlifers in their midst.

But before getting to all of that, the next chapter – chapter 2 – lays out the biblical and theological foundations of this thesis-project.

CHAPTER 2: BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

Introduction

The hypothesis of this thesis-project is that normalizing midlife in the church – meaning, normalizing *awareness* about midlife, and normalizing *ministry* to midlife – will help it to become a season of spiritual formation.

This chapter explores the biblical and theological foundations for this hypothesis, and does so in three sections. The first section will provide an overall theology of spiritual formation. The second will lay out a theology of life stages and spiritual growth stages in general. And then the final section will explore a theology of midlife in particular.

A Theology of Spiritual Formation

The hypothesis of this thesis-project is geared towards spiritual formation. In other words, it assumes that spiritual formation is a desirable outcome, and hopes to show how churches can help those in midlife to experience it. Given, then, how important spiritual formation is to this thesis-project, this section will define what spiritual formation is, why it is important, and how Christians can join the work of spiritual formation.

What Spiritual Formation Is

The term “spiritual formation” can be understood from both a human angle and a divine angle.

The Human Angle

From the human angle, spiritual formation is about the spirit of a person being formed. Similar to how a body can be strengthened and toned, so a person's spirit can also be shaped and formed.

What is a person's spirit? Before attempting to answer this question, it should be noted that "we cannot derive an exact, scientific psychology or anthropology from the Bible."¹ Indeed, anyone who tries to use the Old and New Testaments as an anatomy textbook will only encounter great confusion! For the terms for "soul" and "spirit" are often used interchangeably.² In one instance, people are said to have body and soul, but then in another instance it is body and spirit.³ In one instance, grief plagues the soul, but in another it troubles the spirit.⁴ In one instance, it is the soul that is saved; in another, it is the spirit.⁵

All this to say that the "Scriptures are not primarily interested in the constituent 'parts' of man or in his psychological structure, but in the relationships in which he stands," and especially his relationship with God.⁶ For example, when Jesus commands his followers to "love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all

1. Anthony A. Hoekema, *Created in God's Image* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), 204.

2. Even in texts such as 1 Thessalonians 5:23, where "soul" and "spirit" are not used interchangeably, "[t]he distinction between the bodily and spiritual aspects of human nature is easily made, but to make a comparable distinction between 'spirit' and 'soul' is forced." F. F. Bruce, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1982), 130. Cf. Hoekema, *Created in God's Image*, 208.

3. Cf. Matt 10:28, 1 Cor 7:34, and Jas 2:25.

4. Cf. 1 Sam 1:10, Isa 54:6, John 12:27, and John 13:21.

5. Cf. Jas 1:21 and 1 Cor 5:5.

6. Hoekema, *Created in God's Image*, 204.

your strength,” the emphasis is not on a precise dissection of human nature, but on the call to love God with all that a person is.⁷

None of this means, however, that the word “spirit” is thus meaningless: “Though the Bible does see man as a whole, it also recognizes that the human being has two sides: physical and nonphysical. He has a physical body, but he is also a personality.”⁸ And so when the term “spiritual formation” refers to the formation of a person’s “spirit,” what it is referring to is the formation of that nonphysical side, which the Scriptures also describe as the “soul” or the “heart.”

Spiritual formation, then, is not primarily about changing external circumstances, but about cultivating the things internal to a person – his or her thoughts, attitudes, feelings, desires, will, character.⁹ Indeed, the fruit of the Spirit – or what the Holy Spirit *forms* in a person – are those internal traits such as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.¹⁰ From this angle, then, spiritual formation is about the formation of a person’s spirit.¹¹

7. Mark 12:30.

8. Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image*, 217.

9. In the work of spiritual formation, if there *is* an effort to change external circumstances, then it is only to support that work of internal cultivation (i.e. changing external circumstances to make space for internal change), or it is only as an outflow of that internal cultivation (i.e. internal character growth leading someone to change their external circumstances).

10. See Gal 5:22.

11. A biblical reference to the human spirit being formed can be found in 2 Corinthians 7:1: “Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God.” Here, the Apostle Paul is exhorting his audience to cleanse not just body but also spirit. And when he says, “bringing holiness to completion,” he means that both body and spirit should undergo a kind of formation unto holiness.

The Divine Angle

From another angle, however, spiritual formation is about the work of the *Holy Spirit* to form a person's spirit. The emphasis here is no longer on the *object* of spiritual formation (the human individual), but the *subject* (the Holy Spirit).

Much could be said about the work of the Holy Spirit – how he brings new life, how he empowers faith and obedience, how he imparts gifts of discernment and abilities. But ultimately, everything that he does is for the sake of glorifying Christ.¹² Yes, the Spirit brings new life to people, but that new life is specifically in union with *Christ*.¹³ Yes, the Spirit empowers people to respond with faith and obedience, but it is a faith *in Christ* and an obedience *to Christ*.¹⁴ And yes, the Spirit gives gifts to people, but those gifts are for the sake of “building up the body of *Christ*, until we all attain... to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.”¹⁵ Everything that the Spirit does is about Christ.

It follows, then, that the goal of the Spirit's *formative* work is nothing less than to form people into the image of Christ.¹⁶ As Sinclair Ferguson states, “The ministry of the Spirit is... to

12. See John 16:14. “To be sure, the Spirit is not *the* center for Paul – Christ is, ever and always – but the Spirit stands close to the center, making Christ known, and empowering all genuinely Christian life and experience.” Gordon D. Fee, *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1996), 180.

13. “[The Holy Spirit] made us alive with Christ, to Christ, and in Christ.” R. C. Sproul, *The Mystery of the Holy Spirit* (Fearn Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2014), 93. See Rom 8:5-11.

14. See 1 Cor 12:3 and Eph 3:14-21. “For the goal of the Spirit's ministry in sanctification is the reproduction of likeness to Christ, and in this sense to produce the imitation of Christ. It therefore involves following Jesus Christ...” Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1996), 152.

15. Eph 4:12-13.

16. It is worth noting at this point that God *is* concerned with spheres beyond mere personal transformation. His concern is with his kingdom of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit coming on earth as it is in heaven. His concern is with disarming demonic rulers and authorities, the institutions of oppression and injustice today. His concern is with even the renewal of all creation. And yet, Romans 8:19 seems to suggest that on this side of Jesus' return, personal spiritual transformation is somehow at the center of all of these great

reshape us to be 'like Christ', from one degree of glory to another. This is the central function of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Christian believer."¹⁷ Everything that the Spirit does in the life of the believer is towards this goal of Christlikeness.¹⁸

So from the human angle, spiritual formation is about the formation of a person's spirit, cultivating the things internal to a person such as thoughts, feelings, desires, will, and character. And from the divine angle, spiritual formation is about the Holy Spirit forming Christlikeness in the lives of God's people. Dallas Willard combines these two angles into this one definition: "[S]piritual formation for the Christian basically refers to the Spirit-driven process of forming the inner world of the human self in such a way that it becomes like the inner being of Christ himself."¹⁹ Put more simply, spiritual formation is about the Holy Spirit forming a person's spirit into the likeness of Christ.²⁰

purposes – for even creation “waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God.” There will be a day when Jesus will return, fully eradicating sin and injustice, fully doing away with death and the devil, and fully renewing the world into peace and joy. But until that day, it is primarily through people that God chooses to pursue these great purposes. And in this present age of the Spirit, it is the work of the Spirit to form people into the image of Christ in order that they might pursue these great purposes of God.

17. Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit*, 56.

18. See 2 Cor 3:18. Also, in Romans 8:28-29, Paul writes that “all things work together for the good of those who love God.” And then he identifies that purpose to which all things work as “to be conformed to the image of his Son.” By “all things,” it is hard to imagine Paul not including the work of the Spirit. This (con)formative process, then, is the purpose for which the Spirit works.

19. Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart: Putting On the Character of Christ* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2002), 22.

20. “[T]he Spirit of God conforms the believer into the likeness of Christ to the glory of God.” Fee, *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God*, 184.

The Importance of Spiritual Formation

Having defined what spiritual formation is, now the question to address is “why is spiritual formation important?” There are many reasons: First, the present moment is the age of the Spirit, and so what the Spirit is presently doing – including his formative work – must be important.²¹ Second, being formed by the Spirit is absolutely crucial to God’s plan of salvation, for only when the Spirit completes his work of sanctifying God’s people into the image of Christ, can a sinless and suffering-less world be introduced without risk of repeating the Fall.²² And third, the ultimate goal of the Spirit’s formative work is so that at Jesus’ return, he would be front and center – “the firstborn among many brothers.”²³ Spiritual formation is important because it is what prepares redeemed humanity for its ultimate purpose, which is to reflect the glory of the Son by bearing his image.

Now focusing on the topic of midlife, why is spiritual formation important here? As mentioned in chapter 1, what fundamentally defines midlife is not difficulty with external circumstances, but the internal realization of one’s mortality. The deepest questions of midlife are about dreams and limitations, about hopes and disappointments, about desire and

21. “The Spirit is the evidence that the eschatological promises of Paul’s Jewish heritage have been fulfilled. At the same time, the Spirit as God’s empowering presence enables the people of God not simply to endure the present as they await the final consummation, but to do so with verve (with “spirit” if you will). And that is because the future is as sure as the presence of the Spirit is an experienced reality; hence the significance of the dynamic and experiential nature of the Spirit’s coming into the life of the believer and the church.” Fee, *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God*, 56.

22. “Christ through his redemptive work brings us higher than Adam was before the Fall. Adam could still lose his sinlessness and blessedness, but the glorified saints will no longer be able to do so. Adam was ‘able not to sin and die’ (*posse non peccare et mori*), but the saints in glory will ‘not be able to sin and die’ (*non posse peccare et mori*). This unlosable perfection is what man is destined for – and nothing less!” Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image*, 92.

23. Rom 8:29. “This final perfection of the image will be the culmination of God’s plan for his redeemed people.” Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image*, 91.

dissatisfaction. And these questions reside at the level of a person's spirit... which is where spiritual formation takes place.

But also as mentioned in chapter 1, it is not a given that spiritual formation happens at midlife. It is possible for the difficulties of midlife to be so overwhelming that someone finds their faith too lacking to keep. And then there is the possibility of shortchanging the internal work that midlife requires – through avoidance (i.e. not trying to work on the internal spiritual questions) and through diversions (e.g. entertainment, busy-ness, substances, etc.).

And even those who *do* wish to engage the deeper questions of midlife are not often counseled to join the Spirit's work of formation. Much of the present literature does an adequate job of describing the midlife experience, and even provides keen insight into what is happening internally at midlife. But helping the midlifer see more of Jesus and become more like him is so often not the goal.

This is to be expected from secular approaches, but even Christian approaches can be found lacking. There can be talk of "growth" and "transformation" and "spiritual maturity," but those terms seem to be connected to Christ only in passing. Vision is cast for how the second half of life can be characterized by greater wisdom and acceptance and graciousness and generativity, but none of these are framed in terms of cultivating a relationship with Jesus. There can be counsel towards disciplines and habits for navigating midlife challenges, but so often the main purpose is not a deeper rootedness in Christ, but only to help the midlifer avoid poor and brash decision-making, or to help the midlifer experience the most fulfillment in their stage of life. Certainly, there is nothing wrong with any of these: growth, transformation,

graciousness, generativity, avoiding poor and rash-decision making. But without centering them on Christ, they are not Christian spiritual formation.²⁴

All the more important, then – when the tendency of midlife dynamics is to push a person away from faith and away from the internal work required, and when so much of the present literature that addresses midlife is not centered on Christ – that midlife ministry in the church should be oriented towards the goal of spiritual formation.

How Christians Can Join the Work of Spiritual Formation

Having defined what spiritual formation is, and having addressed why spiritual formation is so important, the next topic to discuss is how Christians can join the Holy Spirit in his work of forming a person's spirit into the image of Christ.

Principles

Before suggesting specific practices for joining the work of the Spirit, there are four principles to consider.

Principle 1: spiritual formation is of God

The first principle is that spiritual formation is of God: “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works,

24. Paul Tripp takes this argument even further: “If all you had to do in midlife was admit that you had failed along the way, or to let go of some of your dreams, or accept that you were getting older, this period of time would not be so difficult. But the biggest problems of midlife are problems of the heart. We all tend to melt God-given gold into calves for our worship. We constantly attribute to our idols what only God can do. This struggle, which is evident in every period of our lives, tends to rage during the midlife years.” Paul David Tripp, *Lost in the Middle: Midlife and the Grace of God* (Wapwallopen, PA: Shepherd Press, 2004), 262–3.

so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”²⁵ Not only the initial moment of saving faith is by grace, but also the continued life of good works – that too was prepared by God beforehand. And so Willard notes: “Christlikeness in the inner being is not a human attainment. It is, finally, a gift of grace. Though we must act, the resources for spiritual formation extend far beyond the human. They come from the interactive presence of the Holy Spirit in the lives of those who place their confidence in Christ.”²⁶

Principle 2: spiritual formation requires human participation

With that said, the second principle is that spiritual formation still requires human participation. While the good works mentioned above were prepared by God beforehand, it is still the individual Christian who must “walk in them.” And so Willard also notes that “[w]ell-informed human effort certainly is indispensable, for spiritual formation is no passive process.”²⁷ This is at very least the case because human will and inner intentions are included in the arena of the Spirit’s formative work.²⁸ And how can the Spirit be forming an individual’s will and intentions without also engaging them? For the Spirit to shape how an individual

25. Eph 2:8-10.

26. Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 23. Anthony Hoekema agrees: “The renewal of the image of God, therefore, is not an experience in which we remain passive, but one in which we must take an active part. But – and this deserves emphasis – this renewal is still primarily the work of the Holy Spirit. We are not able to renew ourselves in our own strength. The image of God can be restored in us only as we remain in union with Christ.” Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image*, 91.

27. Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 23.

28. “[S]piritual transformation only happens as each essential dimension of the human being is transformed to Christlikeness....” Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 41.

makes choices presumes that the individual is actually engaged in making choices. And so spiritual formation must involve human participation.²⁹

Principle 3: spiritual formation involves heart-level repentance

The third principle is that spiritual formation involves heart-level repentance. In Ezekiel 36, the Lord says: “I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.”³⁰ This is a picture of repentance. John Murray defines repentance as the “the response of turning from sin unto God.”³¹ Taking it a step further, Robert Mulholland defines repentance as “not being sorry for the things you have done, but being sorry you are the kind of person that does such things.”³² The picture in Ezekiel encompasses both. When the Spirit is put within people, they not only turn away from disobedience and turn towards obedience, but they also receive a new heart, a new spirit. This is a full-orbed repentance that is not only a turning away from sin at the level of behavior, but also at the level of the heart or the spirit.

Worth noting is that Ezekiel’s picture also confirms the sovereign role of God (“I will give you a new heart,” “I will put my Spirit within you,” etc.), while still maintaining the necessity of

29. To ask, “Can God form someone into the likeness of Christ without their participation?” is akin to asking, “Can God make a rock he cannot lift?” By virtue of the definition of the words in the question, the question is nonsensical.

30. Ezek 36:26-27.

31. John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1955), 116.

32. M. Robert Mulholland, *The Deeper Journey: The Spirituality of Discovering Your True Self*, expanded ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2016), 23.

human participation (“you to walk in my statutes,” “you to be careful to obey my rules”). The process of spiritual formation, then, involves a full-orbed repentance that is of God but also requires human participation.

Principle 4: in spiritual formation, beholding is the cause of becoming

The fourth and final principle is that – in spiritual formation – beholding is the cause of becoming. In 2 Corinthians 3, the Apostle Paul writes: “And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.”³³ Paul Barnett comments that: “Significantly, the verbs ‘behold’ and ‘transformed’ are both present tense, suggesting that the second occurs at the same time as – and as a result of – the first. As we behold, so we are transformed.”³⁴ Indeed, Willard’s schema for spiritual formation seems to reflect this understanding: “If we are concerned about our own spiritual formation or that of others, this vision of the kingdom is the place we must start.”³⁵ Human participation in spiritual formation, then, cannot be simply about repentance; it must be repentance in response to the Lord. It is

33. 2 Cor 3:18.

34. Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 207.

35. Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 86. It is only after beholding the right vision that the decision for and practice of spiritual formation can take place.

by beholding Jesus that people become like him.³⁶ And this is all through the work of the Spirit.³⁷

In sum, when discussing how Christians might join the Spirit in his work of formation, these are the four principles to consider: First, spiritual formation is of God. But second, spiritual formation still requires human participation. Third, spiritual formation involves heart-level repentance, which is turning away from sin and becoming more like Christ. But fourth, that repentance must be in response to Christ; for in spiritual formation, beholding is the cause of becoming.

Practices

Having considered the principles that guide how a Christian might join the work of spiritual formation, the next step is to suggest specific practices.

Practices of the church in Acts 2

Acts chapter 2 gives a snapshot of the practices of the fledgling Church. In verse 42, the early Christians “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching” – teaching that would later be written down in the New Testament Scriptures.³⁸ Verse 42 also shows them devoting

36. “Fix your attention on God and you’ll be changed from the inside out.” Stephen A. Macchia, *Crafting a Rule of Life: An Invitation to the Well-Ordered Way* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2012), 13.

37. “And we are enabled not only to see that image [of Christ] but to be progressively transformed into it by the sovereign Spirit.” Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 209.

38. See F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 73.

themselves “to the apostles’ ... fellowship” and “the breaking of bread.” This is the practice of Christian community – both fellowshiping with spiritual leaders and mentors, as well as doing life together with peers. Verse 42 then closes with these early believers devoted to prayer. What follows in verses 44 and 45 are outflows – or applications – of this devotion to the Scriptures, community, and prayer: “And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need.” The snapshot then concludes in verses 46 and 47 with the community reflecting back on all that they were experiencing with gladness and praise to God: “[T]hey received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people.” The snapshot of the Acts 2 community reveals several key practices of the fledgling Church: devotion to the Scriptures, to community, to prayer, as well as to application and to reflection.

Just prior to this snapshot, the Apostle Peter concludes his Pentecost sermon by saying, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”³⁹ The result of this was that “those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.”⁴⁰ It is these three thousand souls that devoted themselves to the practices mentioned above.

39. Acts 2:38.

40. Acts 2:41.

Taken altogether, what Acts chapter 2 shows is that when people become Christians and receive the Holy Spirit, these are the spiritual practices they adopt for their formation: Scripture, community, prayer, application, and reflection.⁴¹

Today, these continue to be the key practices for spiritual formation:⁴² The practice of Scripture is to listen to what God has to say; the practice of prayer, then, is to speak back to God.⁴³ The practice of application is to live in response to God; the practice of reflection, then, is to learn from and process how one is living. Tying it all together is the practice of community, which is the context in which all of these other practices are honed and take place.

But it is not enough to simply do these practices. In order to truly participate in the formative work of the Spirit, these practices must be done in accordance with the four principles mentioned above.

Scripture

In order for the practice of studying Scripture to form a person into the image of Christ, that person must approach the Bible as revelation from God, and not merely as human literature (principle 1).⁴⁴ But the study of Scripture must also engage human effort through the

41. "Luke presents in this paragraph an ideal picture of this new community, rejoicing in the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Spirit." Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, 73. Bruce goes on to identify a similar list of spiritual practices.

42. When Dallas Willard lists the "means of changing my inner being until it is substantially like [Christ's]," he includes on that list "study and meditation on... the teaching of Scripture," "deep reflection," the "practice [of] explicitly 'self-sacrificial' actions", learning about "the lives of well-known 'saints,'" and "prayer that God will directly work in my inner being." See Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 90–1.

43. "Prayer is essentially the human response to the Word.... God's Word has the initiative; we are simply the listeners." Simon Chan, *Spiritual Theology: A Systematic Study of the Christian Life* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1998), 128.

44. See 2 Tim 3:16-17.

individual's reading and meditation if it is to be fruitful (principle 2). What's more, in the course of this study, God's Word will challenge a person's previously held assumptions and understandings, and this will require repentance – a changing of the mind so that the person thinks more God's thoughts and less their own (principle 3). But this repentance – if it is to be the Spirit's work of formation into the image of Christ – must flow out of a clear beholding of Christ's truth and wisdom (principle 4). Fortunately, the very purpose of the Scriptures is to help the believer behold Christ.⁴⁵

Community

In order for a person's Christian community to be spiritually formative, he or she must see that community as it truly is – not merely as a group of like-minded friends or some social club, but as the people of God, who are constituted by God (principle 1).⁴⁶ But in order for spiritual formation to happen in the context of community, there must also be human participation; for relationships require time and energy and effort to build and cultivate (principle 2). What's more, in an age when people are still selfish and still sin against each other, the practice of community will be spiritually formative only if that sin and selfishness is repented from (principle 3). But this repentance – if it is to be the Spirit's work of formation into the image of Christ – must flow out of a clear beholding of Christ's selflessness and love

45. See Luke 24:27, also Acts 10:43 and John 1:45.

46. "They are God's family, evidenced by the Spirit's crying *Abba* from within their hearts; they are God's temple, the place of his habitation on earth by his Spirit; and they form Christ's body, made so by their common lavish experience of the one Spirit." Fee, *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God*, 183.

(principle 4).⁴⁷ Fortunately, the very calling of Christian community is to help people behold Christ.⁴⁸

Prayer

In order for the practice of prayer to be spiritually formative, it must be understood as a response to God, as coming before his throne to speak with him at his invitation (principle 1).⁴⁹ For if prayer is understood as merely a religious version of talk therapy or as some rote ritual, then it will not be spiritually formative. And yet, though prayer is a response to God's invitation, it very much requires human effort. In order for prayer to be fruitful in a person's life, that person must take the time and energy to pray (principle 2).⁵⁰ What's more, there is much in the world by way of distraction and temptation to get in the way of prayer. In such moments, in order for prayer to be spiritually formative, there must be repentance from those distractions and temptations (principle 3). But this repentance – if it is to be the Spirit's work of formation into the image of Christ – must flow out of a clear beholding of Christ's beautiful example of prayer, and also of the Father's faithfulness to heed those prayers that are offered up in his Son's name (principle 4).⁵¹

47. See Phil 2:1-13.

48. See John 17:20-4.

49. See Luke 11:9-13.

50. "The soul learns to pray by praying." Arthur G. Bennett, *The Valley of Vision: A Collection of Puritan Prayers and Devotions* (1975; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2019), viii.

51. See John 16:23-27.

Application

In order for the practice of application to be spiritually formative, it must be done in God's strength and according to God's calling (principle 1).⁵² Otherwise, it can fall into legalism or works righteousness. This, however, is not to obscure the fact that application must still involve human effort and participation; for it is the individual believer who is doing the applying (principle 2)! What's more, application – almost by definition – is an outworking of heart-level repentance (principle 3). It is – through outward behaviors and actions – turning away from old ways of living, and turning towards new ways of living. But this repentance – if it is to be the Spirit's work of formation into the image of Christ – must flow out of a clear beholding of Christ's character and holiness, so that what is driving repentance is not merely a desire to become a better person or to avoid the consequences of sin, but an even greater desire to become like Jesus (principle 4).⁵³

Reflection

Finally, in order for the practice of reflection to be spiritually formative, it must be done in such a way that God is the one shaping the reflection (principle 1).⁵⁴ This could happen through studying the Scriptures, or through prayer, or through community input. But as with all the other practices, faithfully engaging in this kind of reflection still very much requires intentionality on the part of the believer (principle 2). What's more, because the human heart

52. See Phil 2:12-13.

53. See Heb 12:1-3.

54. See Ps 90:12.

is prone to self-deception, in order for reflection to be spiritually formative, there must be an effort to repent from such self-deception (principle 3).⁵⁵ But this repentance – if it is to be the Spirit’s work of formation into the image of Christ – must flow out of a clear beholding of Christ’s justification and assurance, such that the safety of already being accepted in him frees the believer to become honest about even the most difficult realizations (principle 4).⁵⁶

Section Summary

The hypothesis of this thesis-project is that normalizing midlife in the church will help it to become a season of spiritual formation. Given that this entire thesis-project is geared towards that goal of spiritual formation, this section endeavored to provide an overall theology of spiritual formation – defining what it is, explaining why it is important, and showing how Christians can join the work of spiritual formation.

In terms of its definition, spiritual formation is all about the Holy Spirit forming a person’s spirit into the likeness of Christ. In terms of its importance, the questions of midlife are spiritual questions, but the tendencies of midlife are to avoid those questions or to be overwhelmed by them; all the more important, then, that midlife ministry be centered on the goal of spiritual formation. Fortunately, the Lord has not left his people without means of

55. “Most of us... find it difficult to live with the thought that we are presenting a false self to others. So we employ self-deceptive strategies – and are, as a result, taken in with everyone else by the presentation of this false self.” Gregg A. Ten Elshof, *I Told Me So: Self-Deception and the Christian Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 112.

56. “In accepting the unconditioned love of God, they also accept their own unworthiness. They do not fear to gaze into the depths of their own indigence; instead they allow themselves to be permeated by the truth of their own earth-generated existence. The sort of humility that is acted out is, in fact, an exaltation of God’s gratuitous love for human beings – even while they remain sinners.” Michael Casey, *A Guide to Living in the Truth: St. Benedict’s Teaching on Humility*, rev. ed. (Saint Louis, MO: Liguori, 2001), 180.

formation. Instead, there are several key practices that allow the Christian to join the Spirit in his work of forming people into the image of Christ. Those practices are: Scripture, community, prayer, application, and reflection. But it is not enough to simply do the practices. In order for them to be spiritually formative, they must be done in consideration of these four principles: spiritual formation is of God; spiritual formation requires human participation; spiritual formation involves heart-level repentance; and in spiritual formation, beholding is the cause of becoming.

Now returning to the hypothesis of this thesis-project, what would it look like for midlife to become a season of spiritual formation? It would look like change happening at the level of the human spirit or heart – that is, at the level of thoughts and desires, and at the level of will and character. It would look like the Holy Spirit recognizably at work to produce that change, with the result being greater formation into the image of Christ. And it would look like deeper engagement in those spiritual practices that are the means for that formation.

A Theology of Life Stages and Spiritual Growth Stages

In an effort to lay a biblical and theological foundation for this thesis-project on midlife and spiritual formation, the previous section presented an overall theology of spiritual formation. Now this section will present a theology of life stages and spiritual growth stages in general, before moving on to this chapter's final section regarding midlife in particular.

Life Stages in Scripture

Although the Scriptures do not present a tidy systematic theology of chronological life stages, several passages confirm its reality and significance.

Luke 2

The narrative of Jesus' early life shows him growing through the stages of childhood and youth. Luke chapter 2 verse 40 describes him as a child who "grew and became strong." And then later in verse 52, Jesus is said to have "increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man." The narrative of Jesus' life assumes that individuals grow, and progress through life stages as they do.

Deuteronomy 6

In his second giving of the Law, Moses exhorts the people of Israel: "And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house...."⁵⁷ What's more, "When your son asks you in time to come, 'What is the meaning of the testimonies and the statutes and the rules that the LORD our God has commanded you?' then you shall say to your son, 'We were Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt. And the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand....'"⁵⁸ In both passages, there is a clear acknowledgement of the distinction not only between life stages,

57. Deut 6:6-7.

58. Deut 6:20-21.

but also between the role of people in each stage – adults are the teachers, and children are the learners.

1 Corinthians 13

The wider context of 1 Corinthians 13 is a discussion about spiritual gifts and the exhortation to pursue growth in love more than growth in gifts.⁵⁹ Verse 11 of chapter 13 is meant to serve this broader exhortation: When a child grows up into an adult, the adult ought to give up childish ways. And so in the same way, history will also “grow up” and there will be a time when gifts such as prophecy and tongues will pass away; love, however, “never ends.”⁶⁰

What is assumed in verse 11, however, is germane to this discussion of life stages. Albert Mohler comments: “The Apostle Paul says that what we should expect of children is that they be children. Specifically, he speaks of the child who spoke, thought, and reasoned as a child. It would be irrational and also unbiblical to expect a child to speak, think, or reason as an adult.”⁶¹ Here again, the Scriptures confirm the notion that not only do people grow through distinct life stages, but the expected roles of each stage are also distinct. Children ought to have childish ways; adults ought not.

59. See Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 625.

60. 1 Cor 13:8. See Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 646-7.

61. R. Albert Mohler, *Life in Four Stages: A Biblical Celebration of Childhood, Youth, Adulthood, and Age* (Louisville, KY: SBT Press, 2018), 24.

References to Youth (and Young Adulthood)

So far, the Scriptures presented have only addressed the stages of childhood and adulthood. But the Scriptures also reference the stage of youth quite a bit.⁶² Now to be clear, the term “youth” in the Scriptures seems to span a wider range of life than the term “adolescence” does today. For in the Scriptures, oftentimes the term “youth” is conflated with the term “young man.”⁶³ And in the Scriptures, “youth” is that stage of life when people marry and have children.⁶⁴ Youth and young adulthood, then, are held together, and in contrast to older – or full – adulthood.⁶⁵ For example, in comparison to the stage of older adulthood, youth and young adulthood are described as a season of energy, vigor, and strength.⁶⁶ But at the same time, the stage of youth and young adulthood can also be a time of greater vulnerability – they are the simple who need to be taught, and the sins and iniquities of youth are to be regretted.⁶⁷ All this to say that the Scriptures do assume a stage of life between childhood and full adulthood, and it is the stage of youth and young adulthood. What’s more, that particular stage carries with it a distinct set of descriptors and expectations.⁶⁸

62. In fact, several Old Testament laws explicitly use the stage of youth as a key reference point for determining how the law would be applied. See Lev 22:13 and Num 30:3ff.

63. Cf. Acts 20:9 and Acts 20:12, where Eutychus is described as both a “young man” and a “youth.”

64. See Prov 5:18 and Ps 127:4.

65. The Apostle Paul describes Timothy as a “youth” in 1 Timothy 4:12, but then tells him, “Do not rebuke an older man but encourage him as you would a father, younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, younger women as sisters, in all purity.” 1 Tim 5:1-2.

66. See Job 33:25 and Ps 103:5.

67. See Prov 1:4, Ps 25:7, and Job 13:26.

68. See Titus 2:1-8. The Apostle Paul distinguishes not only older men and women from younger men and women, but he also gives specific prescriptions for how each group is supposed to be.

References to Old Age

The final stage of life mentioned in the Scriptures is old age. What makes Isaac's birth in Genesis chapter 21 so miraculous is that it happened when Abraham and Sarah were old in age. The same can be said for John the Baptist's birth to Elizabeth in Luke chapter 1. Judges chapter 8 recounts how Gideon died at a "good old age."⁶⁹ And in the book of Ruth, the women of Bethlehem bless Naomi, saying to her, "[Obed] shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age."⁷⁰ The Psalmist pleads with God to "not cast me off in the time of old age," and "forsake me not when my strength is spent."⁷¹ And the beautiful promise in Isaiah 44 is that "even to your old age I am he, and to your gray hairs I will carry you."⁷²

It is clear from the Scriptures that people are assumed to chronologically progress through four life stages: childhood into youth and young adulthood, then from there into full and older adulthood, and then finally into old age.⁷³ The Scriptures also show that with each stage come certain distinct descriptors and expectations. Taken altogether, then, the Scriptures affirm the reality and significance of life stages. People are different at different stages in life, and people in the same stage of life share certain commonalities.

69. Judg 8:32.

70. Ruth 4:15.

71. Ps 71:9.

72. Isa 46:4.

73. The Bible also mentions the stage of "infancy," but for the purposes of this thesis-project, that stage may be subsumed under the stage of "childhood."

Spiritual Growth Stages in Scripture

People, however, grow not only chronologically through life stages, but they are also meant to grow spiritually through spiritual stages. To be clear, spiritual growth is not quite as regular as chronological growth, but several biblical passages suggest a path of spiritual growth that flows through distinct stages.

Ephesians 4

In his letter to the Ephesians, the Apostle Paul makes clear that Christians are to “to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.”⁷⁴ What’s more, he writes a few verses earlier that the goal of ministry is to build up the body of Christ “until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.”⁷⁵ Why? “[S]o that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.”⁷⁶ In Paul’s mind, there are stages to spiritual growth. The stage of spiritual childhood is unavoidable, but it is a time of vulnerability to “every wind of doctrine.” Important, then, is to spiritually grow into “mature manhood,” which is the “stature of the fullness of Christ.”

74. Eph 4:15.

75. Eph 4:13.

76. Eph 4:14.

1 Corinthians 3

In his first letter to the Corinthians, the Apostle Paul introduces another stage of spiritual growth: “infants in Christ.”⁷⁷ This, however, was not meant to be a pleasant ascription or a compliment to them. Mohler explains: “The fact that these believers started out as infants is not the problem. The problem is that they were still infants.”⁷⁸ Paul had expected that they would be more mature by now, but instead – due to their jealousy and strife – he has needed to feed them with “milk, not solid food,” for they were not “ready for it.”⁷⁹ Spiritual infancy, then, describes someone who perhaps has a nominal faith, but that faith has yet to manifest itself in spiritual fruit such as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness and gentleness.

Colossians 1

As a final example, in his letter to the Colossians, the Apostle Paul explains to his audience the purpose of his ministry: “[Christ] we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ.”⁸⁰ Here, Paul understands that spirituality is not meant to be stagnant; people are meant to grow spiritually, with the final goal being maturity in Christ.

77. 1 Cor 3:1. It is possible to argue that spiritual infancy is actually not a stage of spiritual growth, but merely a precursor; for Paul compares spiritual infancy to being “people of the flesh,” and not being “spiritual people” at all. However, earlier in 1 Corinthians 1:2, he clearly writes to them as “those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together.” It is fair, then, to view spiritual infancy as an actual stage in spiritual growth, even if it is the most preliminary stage.

78. Mohler, *Life in Four Stages*, 65.

79. 1 Cor 3:2.

80. Col 1:28.

In the same way that the Scriptures affirm the reality and significance of life stages, so the Scriptures also affirm the reality and significance of spiritual growth stages. From spiritual infancy to childhood to mature “manhood,” the direction of spiritual growth is meant to be towards the fullness of Christ. The Scriptures also show that each spiritual stage has its own distinct descriptors and characteristics. Taken altogether, then, the Scriptures affirm the reality and significance of spiritual growth stages. People are different at different stages of spiritual growth, and people in the same spiritual stage share certain commonalities.

Stages of Life and Stages of Spiritual Growth in Contemporary Wisdom

The Scriptures affirm the reality and significance of life stages and spiritual growth stages. The Scriptures even go so far as to establish a foundational understanding for what those stages might be, and what growth through each stage might look like. But the Scriptures do not “fill in the blanks,” and they do not construct a detailed model for all the different stages (nor are they supposed to). As Paul Tripp notes, “The Bible never discusses midlife, just like it never discusses teenagers.”⁸¹ Further discussion about life stages and spiritual growth stages, then, must turn to consider contemporary wisdom.

Demarcating Midlife as a Stage of Life

As mentioned in chapter 1, contemporary wisdom proposes a variety of models for human development. And many of those models suggest a far greater number of life stages than those identified in Scripture. Why the proliferation of stages?

81. Tripp, *Lost in the Middle*, 11.

One possibility is that life spans have increased dramatically in the past century, with people living longer lives and having more years to spend. Gail Sheehy reasons that this leads to more life stages: “Adult life of such quantity and quality has never before been experienced by a mass human civilization. How does it alter the ages and stages of the adult life cycle?... The territory of the mid-forties, fifties, and sixties and beyond is changing so fundamentally it now opens up whole new passages and stages of life.”⁸²

In addition to longevity, Sheehy also notes that “the rapidity and complexity of changes taking place in the world are constantly reshaping the adult life cycle into something fundamentally different from what we have ever known.”⁸³ And she wrote this in the 1990s!

And yet, even without the lengthening of life and the speed of change, demarcating only four stages in life still seems unhelpful. Paul Tripp reasons:

We tend to organize the full range of human development into only four categories: child (0-12), youth (13-20), adult (21-65), elderly (65+). When you examine these categories it doesn't take long to uncover their inadequacy. The categories of child, youth, and elderly are relatively brief spans of time, while the category of adult encompasses 45 years! Consider for a moment the massive differences between a man twenty-one and a man who is sixty-four. Or, let's narrow our scope. Consider the remarkable difference in maturity between a person who is twenty-two and a person who is thirty-five. Emotionally, physically, spiritually, relationally, economically, and socially these two people are in very different places. To say that a person is an adult is to make an observation of such wide generality that it almost means nothing.⁸⁴

It is clear from contemporary wisdom, then, that there is good reason for demarcating a greater number of life stages than Scripture explicitly identifies, including demarcating a stage for midlife.

82. Gail Sheehy, *New Passages: Mapping Your Life Across Time* (New York: Random House, 1995), 6.

83. Sheehy, *New Passages*, 8.

84. Tripp, *Lost in the Middle*, 34–5.

James Fowler's Model for Stages of Spiritual Growth

James Fowler, who was deeply influenced by Jean Piaget, Erik Erikson, and Lawrence Kohlberg, is known for his extensive work on the stages of faith formation, as they relate to different life stages. His model consists of seven stages, with the first being a “pre-stage.”

Fowler's model

According to Fowler's model, infants and toddlers reside in that “pre-stage” of “undifferentiated faith.” Here, “we form our first pre-images of God,” and form a sense of whether the world is a trustworthy place or not.⁸⁵ Pre-schoolers then enter stage one – “intuitive-projective faith” – where their faith is not “thought out,” but is “primarily a projection of parental faith.”⁸⁶ Then at elementary school age, children enter stage two – “mythic-literal faith,” where they are “capable of narrating stories that they understand in literal terms. Thus, descriptions of God rely on the images of Him that they have been exposed to.”⁸⁷ At this stage (and in most cases), parents are still the primary faith influence, but other influences begin to arise.

“Synthetic-conventional faith” is the third stage, and typically consists of adolescents, though adults can remain in this stage. In this stage, individuals are capable of abstract thought and forming connections across the stories they have heard. As a result, they have ‘developed

85. Robert J. Keeley, “Step by Step: Faith Development and Faith Formation,” in *Shaped by God: Twelve Essentials for Nurturing Faith in Children, Youth, and Adults*, ed. Robert J. Keeley (Grand Rapids, MI: Faith Alive Christian Resources, 2010), 62.

86. Keeley, “Step by Step: Faith Development and Faith Formation,” 62.

87. Alison Andrade, “Using Fowler's Faith Development Theory in Student Affairs Practice,” *College Student Affairs Leadership* 1, no. 2 (2014): 2. <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/csal/vol1/iss2/2>.

conceptions of faith from various influences.”⁸⁸ What’s more, “identity formation is a big part of what is happening at this time.”⁸⁹ People in this stage on the one hand seek independence, while on the other hand want to belong to a group. As a result, they begin to make their own choices about faith.

This leads into Fowler’s fourth stage of faith, which is “individuated-reflective faith.” Typically, this is a stage for college students and young adults. But however old the individual is, at this stage he or she begins to “examine their faith in a way they really didn’t before.... People in this stage seek a church community that allows them to express their faith in their own way. At this point their faith is quite individualistic; for the first time, their faith belongs to them as a person instead of to them as a group.”⁹⁰

The fifth stage is “conjunctive faith,” which Robert Keeley describes as follows:

[T]he unsettled feelings that characterize stage four seem to settle down. People in this stage can own the faith of the community in a way that they couldn’t before. There are still questions, but these arise in the context of a solid faith.... They may be ready for significant encounters with Christian faith traditions other than their own. But unlike an earlier stage, in which people may try out other ways of doing things to see if they fit, this time they may be searching for insights that can enrich their own faith.⁹¹

At this fifth stage, the individual is more anchored in their faith, and is able to engage with other faith traditions without fear of jeopardizing their own faith.

88. Andrade, “Using Fowler’s Faith Development Theory in Student Affairs Practice,” 2.

89. Keeley, “Step by Step: Faith Development and Faith Formation,” 65.

90. Keeley, “Step by Step: Faith Development and Faith Formation,” 67.

91. Keeley, “Step by Step: Faith Development and Faith Formation,” 68.

Lastly, stage six is “universalizing faith,” and consists of only a small number of people (e.g. Martin Luther King Jr, Mother Teresa, and Ghandi). Not many reach this final stage, as what characterizes it is a “radical living out of your faith.”⁹²

Evaluation of Fowler’s model

As with all things built by human wisdom, Fowler’s model has its weaknesses. First of all, spiritual formation is of God (principle 1 from above). He is sovereignly in control of how and when and whether people grow in faith. As such, Fowler’s model cannot be normative, but only suggestive. Second, Fowler’s final stage – because the sample size is so small – may be more a description of what Fowler *hopes* is the case, but it is not actually supported by research.⁹³ And third, it is important to not overly prescribe the age allocations in Fowler’s model, or overly evaluate faith formation based on them, for “the amount of time each person spends in each stage varies quite a bit.”⁹⁴

With that said, however, there is a certain logic to Fowler’s model of faith formation, in terms of how faith begins, how it grows, how it is challenged and stretched, and then how it is settled and bears fruit within the individual believer. Indeed, “the order in which we move from stage to stage is fairly consistent.”⁹⁵

92. Keeley, “Step by Step: Faith Development and Faith Formation,” 69.

93. Andrade, “Using Fowler’s Faith Development Theory in Student Affairs Practice,” 2.

94. Keeley, “Step by Step: Faith Development and Faith Formation,” 61.

95. Keeley, “Step by Step: Faith Development and Faith Formation,” 61.

Janet Hagberg and Robert Guelich's Model for Stages of Spiritual Growth

Similar to Fowler, Janet Hagberg and Robert Guelich also develop a model for spiritual growth that they call the "critical journey." This journey is composed of six stages.⁹⁶

Hagberg and Guelich's model

The first stage is "the recognition of God." Here, faith begins with discovering God – "awareness or awakening to the reality of God in our lives."⁹⁷ This can happen as a child or as an adult.⁹⁸ At this stage, there is a "freshness [to faith] that is seldom ever again as vivid or vital."⁹⁹ The second stage is "the life of discipleship." People in this stage seek to learn and to belong, which combined causes them to "learn the most about God as perceived by others we respect and trust."¹⁰⁰ It is exciting to become a part of a faith community, and to receive and to be guided through it. The third stage is "the productive life." If the previous stage was "taking and filling," then this stage is the "time for reciprocity."¹⁰¹ People in this stage want to give in response to all that they have received, and the giving is rewarding to them.

96. It is worth noting here that Hagberg and Guelich are not deterministic about their model. They make space for the mysterious work of the Spirit. "We believe that mystery occurs all along the journey and that stage theory does not negate that." Janet O. Hagberg and Robert A. Guelich, *The Critical Journey: Stages in the Life of Faith*, 2nd ed. (Salem, WI: Sheffield Publishing Company, 2005), 6.

97. Michelle Van Loon, *Becoming Sage: Cultivating Meaning, Purpose, and Spirituality in Midlife* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2020), 35.

98. In general, Hagberg and Guelich do not attach particular ages to any of their stages.

99. Hagberg and Guelich, *The Critical Journey*, 33.

100. Hagberg and Guelich, *The Critical Journey*, 53.

101. Hagberg and Guelich, *The Critical Journey*, 73.

The fourth stage – “the journey inward” – marks a turn. If in the previous three stages faith was shaped through external teaching and community and activity, then in the final three stages faith is shaped more by internal crisis and then healing and then calling.¹⁰² The “journey inward” stage marks a re-beginning when “the youthful innocence, group identity, and baptized ambition that supported our growth to this point is being pruned away.... [and] we must reassess who we are and what we believe about God and the world around us.”¹⁰³ Worth noting is that these are internal questions, and spiritual questions. And all of this can be a very difficult experience, especially since stage four does not seem to flow naturally from stage three. As such, “[w]hen this stage comes, many feel propelled into it by an event outside of themselves. It’s usually a crisis that turns their world upside down.”¹⁰⁴

In the midst of stage four is an experience that Hagberg and Guelich call “the Wall.” This is a profound moment of confrontation between the individual’s will and the will of God. On the side of the believer, there is dread of letting God take control in this moment; there is dread of surrendering to his will... *even as* the believer knows that letting God take control and surrendering to him are the only ways to receive the healing that he or she needs. As such, many do not make it through the Wall.¹⁰⁵ Many instead try to get the healing they need using their own efforts... which worked during the previous stages, but at “the Wall” it only fails.

102. “In the first three stages, our faith or our spirituality takes its expression most frequently in ways that are prescribed by external standards.... Stages 4 through 6 represent a difficult personal transformation and remembering that require a rediscovering on a different level of what faith and spirituality are all about. These are inner healing stages...” Hagberg and Guelich, *The Critical Journey*, 11.

103. Van Loon, *Becoming Sage*, 39.

104. Hagberg and Guelich, *The Critical Journey*, 94. Hagberg and Guelich go on to explain that by “crisis” they do not necessarily mean a circumstantial crisis (e.g. a medical event). Instead, it could be a crisis of faith, or a crisis of identity.

105. See Van Loon, *Becoming Sage*, 40.

Ultimately, what is needed to make it through “the Wall” is a powerful beholding of the God’s love and grace:

In my judgment, there will not be a significant spiritual recovering in our land or in the world unless or until we can more gracefully and adequately sojourn with people through the Wall. And I believe the major reason we are stuck in front of the Wall goes back to a core belief most of us still hold. Our core belief is that we are not truly loved by God – unconditionally loved and accepted – or that God’s grace is not sufficient. Either we are too bad to be loved or we think we need to earn God’s love and therefore we will never measure up, or we think we really don’t need to address the question because we are sufficient unto ourselves. But as I’ve said previously, if we take God’s love seriously and do the work of the Wall, we will not recognize ourselves on the other side.¹⁰⁶

Those who are able to behold and receive the love and grace of God – and thus make it through the Wall – enter into the fifth stage: “the journey outward.” Having done the internal work of stage four, people in stage five “venture outside our self-interests to others, based on the growth and peace of mind we have experienced from the inner journey.”¹⁰⁷ This may look like the external faith of stages one, two, and three, but it is not: “our focus is outward, but from a new, grounded center of ourselves.”¹⁰⁸

The sixth and final stage is “the life of love.” Here, God’s unconditional love has been fully integrated. The deep focus on others that was present at stage five are now extended and more complete. And the experience of spiritual formation itself becomes all-encompassing: “So pervasive is the presence of the Spirit in our lives that we may not even be particularly conscious of doing something of the Spirit.”¹⁰⁹ The result is Christlikeness, even the stature of

106. Hagberg and Guelich, *The Critical Journey*, 204.

107. Hagberg and Guelich, *The Critical Journey*, 133.

108. Hagberg and Guelich, *The Critical Journey*, 133.

109. Hagberg and Guelich, *The Critical Journey*, 153.

the fullness of Christ: “At this stage, Christ’s life represents not just an example but a model for our lives. We willingly are obedient to God’s call, even, if necessary, unto death.... We begin to understand deeply the paradoxes and pains of Christ’s life.”¹¹⁰

Evaluation of Hagberg and Guelich’s model

As mentioned before, spiritual formation is of God (principle 1 from above). And as such, Hagberg and Guelich’s model for spiritual growth is just as limited as Fowler’s – it cannot be normative, but only suggestive.¹¹¹ With that said, Hagberg and Guelich’s “critical journey” model avoids some of the problems present in Fowler’s model. For one, they do not attach a particular age to any of their stages. Both children and adults, for example, can enter faith at the first stage of “the recognition of God.” What’s more, critics of Fowler’s model have “taken issue with the fact that Fowler seemed to believe that individuals who have reached the last stage of his theory have superior faith experiences than those in the lower stages.”¹¹² But Hagberg and Guelich explicitly state that “[i]t’s not necessary to move on this stage model at all, if access to God is our goal. God is equally accessible to all of us.”¹¹³ And their use of a wheel diagram centered around God (as opposed to a stair or ladder diagram that moves closer to God) to visually display their model is meant to express this conviction.

110. Hagberg and Guelich, *The Critical Journey*, 153.

111. Hagberg and Guelich acknowledge this: “We believe that mystery occurs all along the journey and that stage theory does not negate that.” Hagberg and Guelich, *The Critical Journey*, 6.

112. Andrade, “Using Fowler’s Faith Development Theory in Student Affairs Practice,” 2.

113. Hagberg and Guelich, *The Critical Journey*, 163.

Section Summary

The hypothesis of this thesis-project is that normalizing midlife in the church will help it to become a season of spiritual formation. Given that this entire thesis-project is focused on a particular stage of life and hopes to see that stage as one of greater spiritual formation, this section was necessary for laying out a theology of life stages and spiritual growth stages in general, before moving on to this chapter's final section regarding the stage of midlife in particular.

While Scripture establishes a foundational understanding for stages of life and stages of spiritual growth, contemporary wisdom helps to build on that foundation. In terms of stages of life, contemporary wisdom helpfully expands upon the four stages identified in Scripture. This is the case not only for childhood (e.g. infancy, toddler years, pre-school, etc.), but also for adulthood – including the demarcation of midlife as a stage within adulthood.

And in terms of stages of spiritual growth, while Scripture does broadly identify how spiritual growth can progress, contemporary wisdom can provide helpful detail. Both Fowler's model and Hagberg and Guelich's model explore the details of spiritual growth through various stages. And while their models are different, they share a similar movement. In both models, faith begins in a place that can be real and active and in community. But in the process of growth, it has to move through a period of challenge... and that challenge is not primarily external, but internal: questions, doubts, examination of faith, and struggle with identity. This happens in stage four of Fowler's model: "individuated-reflective faith." And this happens also in stage four of Hagberg and Guelich's model: "the journey inward." The result of moving through the challenge, however, is a faith that is deeper and more resilient and more expansive

than before... which becomes a blessing to many others. Both Fowler's model and Hagberg and Guelich's model follow this overall movement.

What makes this overall movement attractive is that it resonates with how the New Testament talks about faith refinement. The Apostle Peter writes that "you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith – more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire – may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ."¹¹⁴ And the Apostle James writes: "Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing."¹¹⁵ The overall movement of Fowler's model and Hagberg and Guelich's model, then, seems to resonate with this scriptural notion – that in life a person will undergo testing and struggle for the refinement of his or her faith, but this is meant to produce a more sanctified character to the glory of Christ.

How do these models of spiritual growth relate to midlife as a life stage? For their part, Hagberg and Guelich refrain from tying any of their "critical journey" stages to a particular age range.¹¹⁶ But others have noted that the dynamics of their stage four – the turning point of "the journey inward" – are quite similar to the dynamics of midlife: "There are no shortcuts

114. 1 Pet 1:6-7. "Peter says that the trials that grieve us are the trials of grace. God is patiently and perseveringly doing exactly what he promised. He is delivering us from sin and forming us into the image of his Son." Tripp, *Lost in the Middle*, 198.

115. Jas 1:2-4.

116. "The Critical Journey does not tell you exactly how or when to move along your spiritual journey." Hagberg and Guelich, *The Critical Journey*, xxiv.

through this difficult stage, which often presents itself at midlife in the form of losses and transitions.”¹¹⁷

Bringing the two discussions of this section together – life stages and spiritual growth stages – it becomes clear that midlife is a distinct stage of life that is often characterized by internal questions and struggles, but they are for the purpose of greater spiritual growth. This seems to support the hypothesis that midlife – with all its attendant difficulties, and even *because* of them – can indeed become a season of spiritual formation.¹¹⁸

A Theology of Midlife

Having explored an overall theology of spiritual formation, as well as a theology of life stages and spiritual growth stages, this chapter now turns to its final section, which outlines a theology specific to midlife.

Before doing that, however, it is worth reiterating that the Bible does not discuss midlife directly (just as it does not discuss teenagers directly). But the Bible is “the great story of redemption that encompasses the stories of every human life,” and as such it is “comprehensive in scope without being exhaustive in content. It gives us wisdom for everything without directly discussing every particular thing.”¹¹⁹ Paul Tripp concludes that even

117. Van Loon, *Becoming Sage*, 40.

118. “Midlife is more than a time of assessment, it is a time of refinement, where the character of God’s fullness dwells more and more in me. It is a time when I learn to celebrate the redemptive realities inside of me more than the physical, situational, and relational realities outside of me.” Tripp, *Lost in the Middle*, 347.

119. Tripp, *Lost in the Middle*, 15.

though “the Bible never directly discusses the experience of midlife,” it is still “a rich resource for understanding it and for learning how to respond to it.”¹²⁰

With that in mind, this section now turns to the Scriptures for building a theology that specifically addresses the dynamics of midlife. This section begins by presenting the book of Ecclesiastes as a prime example for how to normalize the midlife experience, both in terms of awareness and ministry. And then this section will apply a hermeneutical lens found in Ecclesiastes to the Gospel – showing how the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and the sending of his Holy Spirit is good news for those who experience the struggles of midlife.

The Book of Ecclesiastes

The book of Ecclesiastes consists of two speakers. Qohelet – often translated as “Preacher” or “Teacher” in English versions of the Bible – is the main speaker in the book of Ecclesiastes; his speech spans the vast majority of the book’s twelve chapters.¹²¹ The other speaker in the book is the narrator. His words make up only a few verses in the book. With that said, however, the narrator is crucial for properly interpreting Ecclesiastes, for the narrator introduces Qohelet’s words at the beginning and then evaluates them at the end.

120. Tripp, *Lost in the Middle*, 15.

121. While there are good arguments for such a translation, Enns concludes that such translations are “highly interpretive and cannot claim clear – or even likely – support from the Hebrew.... It is best to leave it untranslated...” Peter Enns, *Ecclesiastes*, Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 17.

How Qohelet Laments Like a Midlifer

In all the Scriptures, Qohelet may be the closest example of someone experiencing the struggles of midlife.¹²² For Qohelet is keenly aware of the limitations of his life, and in particular, the ultimate limitation of death.¹²³ This is why Qohelet sees no point in accumulating pleasure or wealth: “I said of laughter, ‘It is mad,’ and of pleasure, ‘What use is it?’”¹²⁴ It’s also why he sees no point in hard work or accomplishment: “I hated life... I hated all my toil in which I toil under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to the man who will come after me.”¹²⁵ And it’s also why he sees no point in cultivating wisdom: “What happens to the fool will happen to me also. Why then have I been so very wise?”¹²⁶ In fact, about all things, Qohelet repeats this refrain: “All is vanity... a striving after the wind... nothing to be gained under the sun.”¹²⁷ Peter Enns concludes: “Death is a dominant theme in Ecclesiastes... for it is the specter of death that routinely nullifies whatever positive conclusions Qohelet might draw.”¹²⁸ It is clear, then, that if what fundamentally defines midlife is that profound realization

122. “The search for meaning in whatever we do becomes the universal preoccupation of Second Adulthood.... The book of the Bible that best describes the crisis of meaninglessness is Ecclesiastes.” Sheehy, *New Passages*, 148.

123. “Overshadowing all such human attempts to overcome the limitations set to life is the ultimate empirical reality that demonstrates they cannot: death.... Death brings the wise man and the fool in the end to the same place (2:12-16), and it renders futile a life devoted to the accumulation of wealth (2:17-23).” Iain Provan, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 39.

124. Eccl 2:2. See also 1:8.

125. Eccl 2:17-18.

126. Eccl 2:15.

127. Cf. Eccl 1:2, 1:14, 2:1, 2:11, 2:15, 2:17, 2:19, 2:21, 2:23, 2:26, 3:19, etc.

128. Enns, *Ecclesiastes*, 12.

of one's mortality – leading to disappointment and dissatisfaction – then Qohelet is a prime example of someone in midlife.

Here it is worth noting that Qohelet also struggles with being disillusioned with God.¹²⁹ A careful reading of his speech shows that he is not an atheist doomed to a meaningless life because he does not believe in God; rather, he is someone who *does* believe in God, and yet that faith does not protect him from the depths of disappointment and dissatisfaction that he experiences – which leads to disillusionment.¹³⁰ A poignant example of this disillusionment is when Qohelet says: “Also, he has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.”¹³¹ In other words, humanity has this desire that can never be satisfied, and it is the cruelty of God that he made it that way.¹³² Qohelet does believe in God, but he is becoming disillusioned with God... like many in the church who struggle at midlife.

How the Narrator Responds

Through the case of Qohelet, the Scriptures make space for the midlifer's lament. For Qohelet's disappointment, dissatisfaction, and disillusionment are not discounted or ignored,

129. “Qohelet is at least disillusioned with God, if not out-and-out angry with him, for the way things are.” Enns, *Ecclesiastes*, 54.

130. See Eccl 5:1-7.

131. Eccl 3:11. Another example is how Qohelet reinterprets the creation language. While in other Scriptures, the circuit of the sun and the fullness of the sea and the permanence of the earth elicit praise to God (cf. Ps 19, Isa 11, and Ps 78, respectively), for Qohelet in Ecclesiastes 1, it is only evidence of life's vanity.

132. At certain points (e.g. Eccl 2:25, 3:13, and 5:18), it can sound like Qohelet is giving thanks to God for simple pleasures like things to eat and drink and do. But that is unlikely. It is more likely that these verses show Qohelet's resignation to the vanity of life. “He is not offering praise to God but is *resigning* himself to the fact that eating, drinking, and ‘experiencing what is good’ are what God gives everyone to do.” Enns, *Ecclesiastes*, 10.

but he is given ample space to say what he needs to say. In fact, his lament is not only included, but the narrator of Ecclesiastes – in his evaluation of Qohelet – affirms that he is wise and his words are true.¹³³ What’s more, Qohelet’s lament is assigned redemptive value: they are like “goads” that God can use to shepherd his people.¹³⁴ Through the book of Ecclesiastes, then, God – speaking through the narrator of the book – understands, affirms, and holds out redemptive hope for those experiencing the struggles of midlife.

But how might Qohelet’s lament be redemptive? How might his words be like wise and true “goads” for God the Great Shepherd to use? On one level, Qohelet’s lament exposes all of the possible idols of a person’s life. As Russell Moore put it:

We all live out our own personal book of Ecclesiastes.... The preacher there is looking at his life and he says, “I thought that life consisted in wisdom and knowledge. And then I was exhausted by that. It doesn’t bring meaning in vanity. I thought it was pleasure seeking – not that. I thought it was wealth, thought it was power, or thought it was all of those things, and all of those things disappoint me and ultimately we’re all dead like a dog.” You could sum up the book of Ecclesiastes that way.... But Ecclesiastes doesn’t end that way. Ecclesiastes says, “So remember your Creator... for the fact that your idols are going to disappoint you at some point in your life.”¹³⁵

Qohelet’s lament is hard to argue with. It is true that all things outside of God will fail. And so to give one’s life to those things – idolatry – is meaningless. In this way, then, Qohelet’s lament is a kind of “goad” – an unpleasant truth – that God can use to help shepherd people away from idols.¹³⁶

133. Eccl 12:9-10.

134. Eccl 12:11.

135. Russell Moore, “How Should I Prepare for a Midlife Crisis?” *Signposts with Russell Moore* (podcast transcript), May 4, 2018, <https://www.russellmoore.com/2018/05/04/signposts-midlife-crisis>.

136. “There is one thing you can be sure of; midlife will rob you of your idols, and when it does you are either in great danger or on the edge of one of life’s biggest opportunities.” Tripp, *Lost in the Middle*, 321.

With that said, however, unpleasant truths do not always direct people back to God. As mentioned before, spiritual formation is not guaranteed for those struggling at midlife, and Qohelet himself grows disillusioned with God. And so on another level, the narrator of Ecclesiastes does more than merely affirm the truth of Qohelet's lament; he also adds his own prescription for those struggling with the vanity of life: "The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man."¹³⁷

This prescription to "fear God and keep his commandments" is not unique to Ecclesiastes. It is "not a new twist, but the tried and true formula of 'fear and obedience,' that was central to Israel's tradition."¹³⁸ As a result, the narrator's response to Qohelet's lament might be seen as a glib slapping on of theological truth – akin to "take two Bible verses and call me in the morning." For it seems that he merely quotes the standard command to fear and obey God. But in reality, the narrator is someone who has patiently walked with Qohelet – through nearly twelve chapters of lament! – and has carefully considered his every word. The brevity of the narrator's response, then, is not him being glib with Qohelet, but him carefully choosing only the most necessary words to speak. And his quoting the "tried and true formula," then, is not a naïve or reductionist response to a complex lament, but it is "a return to simplicity after having learned from all the complexity."¹³⁹

137. Eccl 12:13.

138. Enns, *Ecclesiastes*, 15.

139. Richard Rohr, *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011), 114.

What does it mean to “fear God and keep his commandments?” Within Israel’s tradition, “fear of the Lord” meant more than just “be afraid of God.”¹⁴⁰ It was a reminder to be in awe of God for his power and majesty and holiness. Eugene Peterson offers this word picture to describe “fear of the Lord”: “The moment we find ourselves unexpectedly in the presence of the sacred, our first response is to stop in silence; we are afraid of saying something inappropriate. Plunged into mystery we become still, we fall silent, all our senses alert. This is the fear-of-the-Lord.”¹⁴¹

The narrator of Ecclesiastes seems to paint a similar picture. For right after his imperative to “fear God and keep his commandments,” he explains: “For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil.”¹⁴² At first glance, the word “judgment” – especially so close to the word “fear” – can connote condemnation. But the clause “whether good or evil” calls for a different interpretation. God is not out looking to catch people in their failures. Rather, he is *attentive* to people in their lives – which means that he *will* note the failures, but he will *also* note the successes... good *and* evil. The narrator’s call to fear the Lord, then, is not a call to “be afraid of God, lest he smite you!” Rather, it is a call to repent from a sleepy or rote or unengaged life with God, and instead to cultivate a life with God that is filled with awe and trust and obedience.

140. “The four words in English (two in Hebrew) are bound together, making a single word. Its function as a single word cannot be understood by taking it apart and then adding up the meanings of the parts.... ‘[F]ear,’ a feeling of apprehension, plus ‘God’, a divine being worthy of worship, is not fear-of-the-Lord. Pursuing that analytical route gets us way off the track.” Eugene H. Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places: A Conversation in Spiritual Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 42–3.

141. Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*, 41.

142. Eccl 12:14.

Here, then, is how the narrator responds to Qohelet. He does not ignore Qohelet's lament, but he patiently listens to it and understands it and gives it space. He does not discount or dismiss Qohelet's lament, but he affirms what is true and wise. And then after carefully considering Qohelet's every word, he offers only the most carefully chosen words in response: "Fear God and keep his commandments." This, to the narrator, is "the *end* of the matter." It is the *telos* of all that Qohelet laments about. All of his disappointment and dissatisfaction and even disillusionment of midlife – in the hands of the Great Shepherd – are meant to goad and guide him towards a more awe-filled and trusting and obedient relationship with God.¹⁴³

How Ecclesiastes Normalizes the Midlife Experience

As mentioned in chapter 1, this thesis-project is considering two aspects to normalization: normalizing awareness and normalizing ministry. The book of Ecclesiastes models both.

Normalizing awareness

"Qohelet" is Hebrew for "someone in the assembly," or "someone in the congregation."¹⁴⁴ While there are many possible explanations for why the main speaker of Ecclesiastes would take on the name "Qohelet," one possible explanation is that "Qohelet" is

143. "Qohelet's words are not a hermeneutical or theological problem to be overcome. They are a path to spiritual growth." Enns, *Ecclesiastes*, 212.

144. "A *qohelet* was probably in origin a person who participated in – played an (unspecified) role in – an assembly (*qahal*)." Provan, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 28.

meant to be an “everyman” – any person in the congregation, in fact. In this view, the first verse of Ecclesiastes presenting Qohelet as a king is not meant to set him apart from the congregation, but is meant to show that even royalty cannot escape the lament of the “everyman.” Qohelet is someone that anybody could so easily become. Anyone could so easily start saying what he says, and start feeling what he feels.

As mentioned above, Qohelet’s lament is the midlifer’s lament – from the realization of mortality, to the ensuing disappointment and dissatisfaction, to the grief of disillusionment. If Qohelet is an “everyman” that anybody could so easily become, then it follows that his lament – the midlifer’s lament – is a lament that anybody could so easily take to their own lips. But even if the name “Qohelet” is not meant to be a stand-in for “everyman,” the fact that his lament is included in the Scriptures as a significant portion of an entire Old Testament book shows that God’s Word does not ignore or dismiss the struggle of midlife, but normalizes it. The struggles of midlife are real and valid; they are worth devoting at least an entire book to addressing them.

With that said, however, that struggle is still seen as distinct. For in the eleven-plus chapters of Qohelet’s lament, much is said about the dynamics of his struggle, and much is said about how his realization of mortality leads to disappointment and dissatisfaction and disillusionment. And so while the books of Ecclesiastes and Job and Lamentations – for example – may share overlapping themes, what concerns Qohelet is distinct from what concerns Job and from what concerns the author of Lamentations. Their distress is over calamities of epic proportions – both personally (for Job) and nationally (for Lamentations).

Qohelet's distress, however, is over a calamity that seems much more mundane: his own mortality.

The point is that the Scriptures – and especially Ecclesiastes – are a model for normalizing awareness of the struggles of midlife. God in his Word recognizes that those struggles are distinct from other struggles, having their own dynamics that require understanding. And at the same time he recognizes that those struggles are a real and valid and unsurprising part of the human experience. And so God, through his Word, stands ready to talk about them.

Normalizing ministry

As mentioned above, the narrator's response to Qohelet is not unique. The explicit call to "fear God and keep his commandments" can be found as early as in the book of Deuteronomy.¹⁴⁵ And it could even be argued that the original form of that call was introduced as early as in the Garden, when God called Adam and Eve to not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, lest they should die. In other words, the narrator's prescription for Qohelet is normal. It has been the basic call of God upon his people since the birth of Israel, and even the birth of humanity.

What's more, the imperative to fear God and keep his commands was for everyone, not just for those in any given life stage, and not just for those struggling in any particular way. For example, in Deuteronomy 6:2, the call to fear God and keep his commands is not only for "you", but also for "your son and your son's son." Also, in Deuteronomy 13:4, the call to fear

145. Cf. Deut 5:29, 6:2, 13:4.

God and keep his commands is addressed not to those struggling with their mortality, but to those who might be tempted towards idolatry.

In other words, while the narrator of Ecclesiastes is fully aware of the distinct dynamics of Qohelet's struggle, and is careful in how he responds to Qohelet's lament, his final prescription centers on what God has been calling his people to do regardless of life stage or type of struggle. And in this way, the book of Ecclesiastes models how to normalize ministry to the struggles of midlife. It does not require a different basic message, nor does it require a set of prescriptions that fundamentally differ from what anyone else needs. Certainly, every individual is unique and circumstances vary, so contextualization is important; but the central core of ministry remains the same. Just like anyone else, those struggling at midlife also need the practices of Scripture and prayer and community and application and reflection contextualized for them. Just like anyone else, those struggling at midlife also need to hear the same basic message contextualized for them. For the Old Testament people of God, that message was "fear God and keep his commands"; for the New Testament people of God, that basic message is the Gospel of Jesus Christ.¹⁴⁶

Ecclesiastes as a Model and Hermeneutical Lens

The book of Ecclesiastes presents Qohelet, whose multi-chapter lament resonates deeply with the struggles of midlife – from the realization of mortality, to the ensuing disappointment and dissatisfaction, to the grief of disillusionment. The narrator's response to

146. 1 Cor 15:1-5, the Apostle Paul refers to the Gospel of the person and work of Christ as the message "of first importance."

Qohelet is careful – listening to him, affirming his struggle as valid, and yet still calling him to do what all of God’s people before him have been called to do – which is to fear God and keep his commandments. In fact, it is precisely because Qohelet struggles with disappointment and dissatisfaction and disillusionment that he all the more needs to cultivate an awe-filled and trusting and obedient relationship with God.

In all this, Ecclesiastes is a model for normalizing the struggles of midlife, both in terms of awareness and ministry. In terms of awareness, Ecclesiastes – by making space for Qohelet’s lament – shows that God’s Word recognizes the struggles of midlife as real, valid, and unsurprising; his Word makes space for addressing them. And in terms of ministry, Ecclesiastes – through the narrator’s response – shows that ministering to the struggles of midlife does not require a different basic message or a different set of prescriptions. While contextualization is important, the central core of ministry remains the same.

This, then, is the hermeneutical lens that Ecclesiastes presents for reading the rest of the Bible: The struggles of midlife are not outside the purview of the Scriptures. And the basic message of the Scriptures – which for the Christian is the Gospel – can be contextualized to the struggles of midlife.¹⁴⁷

The Gospel of Jesus Christ

In order to build a theology that specifically addresses the dynamics of midlife, this section began by looking at the book of Ecclesiastes, which is not only a model for how to

147. “The struggles of midlife do not fall outside of the circle of Scripture’s light, nor do they fall outside the boundaries of the Gospel’s grace.” Tripp, *Lost in the Middle*, 176.

normalize the struggles of midlife, but also presents a hermeneutical lens for reading the rest of the Bible. The remainder of this section will apply that hermeneutical lens to the Gospel – showing how the birth, life, death, resurrection, and exaltation of Jesus, along with the sending of his Holy Spirit and the promise of his return, set forth both example and hope for those experiencing the struggles of midlife.

Jesus as Example

The Gospel reveals a Savior who entered into all the sufferings of humanity. And because his suffering “encompasses all possible human pain,” he therefore even knows something of the sufferings of midlife.¹⁴⁸ Though as the second person of the Trinity he is eternal God, at his incarnation he took on creaturely limitation. Though he never reached the age of forty (humanly speaking), he himself experienced that midlife realization of mortality.¹⁴⁹ And though there were hints of disappointment or dissatisfaction with the course of his life on earth, Jesus never resorted to denial or diversion or being overwhelmed.¹⁵⁰ Instead, he unwaveringly accepted his Father’s will – “setting his face to go to Jerusalem,” where he would eventually be condemned and crucified.¹⁵¹ One result of Jesus’ journey is that he himself was

148. Rosemarie Carfagna, *Contemplation and Midlife Crisis: Examples from Classical and Contemporary Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 2008), 115. “In your midlife suffering, you must remind yourself that you are not alone.... Your Savior is your brother in suffering. He knows exactly what you are going through. No, he never sinned himself, but because he lived for thirty-three years in a fallen world and died an unjust and cruel death, he experientially knows the full range of sin’s effects.” Tripp, *Lost in the Middle*, 192.

149. See Mark 8:31. Jesus was well-aware of how his life would end long before it actually happened. Even when there would still be many days left in his life, he was already aware of how those days would be limited.

150. For a hint of dissatisfaction, see Mark 9:19. For a hint of disappointment, see Mark 14:33-42. As fully human, Jesus must have experienced the full range of human emotions (yet without sin), including disappointment and dissatisfaction.

151. Luke 9:51.

“made perfect” – not in the sense that he was previously sinful, but in the sense that he has now completed his work to become “the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him.”¹⁵²

The author of Hebrews also states, “Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered.”¹⁵³ Jesus’ eternal identity as the Son of God is not being questioned here, but the actual lived-out experience of his faithfulness through suffering is the means through which he “learned obedience.”

In all these ways, Jesus is the prime example for how a human being can journey well through midlife. He not only realized but also accepted his mortality and limitation. He surrendered his will to the Father’s, and accepted the ensuing suffering. And as a result, he came out changed – having learned obedience and being made perfect as mentioned above. Jesus not only calls his followers to die to themselves and to lose their lives in order to find their lives, but he leads the way. For this reason and more, the author of Hebrews thus exhorts fellow believers: “Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith.”¹⁵⁴

Using the hermeneutical lens of Ecclesiastes, the person and work of Christ can be seen as an example for the midlifer to behold. His character – revealed through the basic message of the Gospel – can be understood to speak to the struggles of midlife, and the struggles of midlife do not fall outside the call to be formed into his character. In section one of this chapter – a theology of spiritual formation – it was argued that for midlife to become a season of spiritual formation, it would look like the Holy Spirit changing a person’s spirit to become more

152. Heb 5:9.

153. Heb 5:8.

154. Heb 12:2.

Christlike. The hermeneutical lens of Ecclesiastes opens a way to see what that Christlikeness – in relation to the dynamics of midlife – would look like.

Jesus as Hope

Jesus, however, is not only the believer's *example* to follow; he is also the believer's *hope* for following. For why did Jesus endure crucifixion? For the "joy set before him" – a joy which is at least due to being "seated at the right hand of the throne of God."¹⁵⁵ And because Jesus accepted the will of the Father, even to the point of death on a cross, therefore "God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name."¹⁵⁶

In other words, there is hope for those who follow Jesus through the difficult season of midlife. For according to his story, going through death leads to resurrection, going through surrender leads to freedom, and going through disappointment and dissatisfaction leads to joy and exaltation... which is ultimately about being close to God. The promise of the Gospel is that this hope-filled story of Jesus will also become the story of all who trust and follow him. As Rosemarie Carfagna writes: "Union with Jesus who suffered, died, and rose again gives us a framework within which to understand our lives. In Jesus, suffering, even totally undeserved suffering, is redeemed. If we intentionally unite our struggles with the life-and-death struggle of Jesus on the Cross, we too are redeemed."¹⁵⁷ The final fulfillment of this redemption, of course, will come at Jesus' return.

155. Heb 12:2.

156. Phil 2:9.

157. Carfagna, *Contemplation and Midlife Crisis*, 116.

In the meantime, Christians are not left to their own efforts to try to follow the example of Jesus. Rather, Jesus has given his Spirit, who has already through justifying faith united a believer to Christ, and is now through progressive sanctification conforming that believer to Christlikeness. By the gracious Spirit's power, the believer – in actual lived-out life – is able to follow Jesus' example of journeying well through midlife.

Using the hermeneutical lens of Ecclesiastes, the story of Jesus can be seen as hope for the midlifer who is trying to follow his example. The hope of his resurrection and exaltation and the giving of his Spirit – revealed through the basic message of the Gospel – are promises for every Christian, even those in midlife; and not a single Christian, even those in midlife, falls outside those promises. In section two of this chapter – a theology of life stages and spiritual growth stages – it was argued that spiritual growth at midlife happens by way of God using the sufferings of midlife to grow and refine faith. The hermeneutical lens of Ecclesiastes opens a way to see how the story of Jesus' death followed by resurrection and exaltation gives hope to persevere as God refines the midlifer through struggle and suffering.

Section Summary

The hypothesis of this thesis-project is that normalizing midlife in the church will help it to become a season of spiritual formation. Given that normalization is such an important aspect of this thesis-project, this section was necessary not only for laying out a theology of midlife, but also for exploring whether a hypothesis regarding normalization could be supported by such a theology.

The book of Ecclesiastes was the starting point for this exploration. For in Ecclesiastes, Qohelet is presented as someone whose lament maps onto the dynamics of midlife quite closely – from his profound realization of mortality, to the resulting disappointment, dissatisfaction, and disillusionment. What’s more, the narrator of Ecclesiastes offers a prescriptive word to Qohelet, and therefore he offers a prescriptive word to those who experience the struggles of midlife.

Taken altogether, the book of Ecclesiastes serves to normalize midlife in terms of awareness. For Qohelet’s lament is not dismissed as strange or discounted as invalid, but is instead made space for, listened to, understood, and affirmed. His lament is not outside the purview of God’s Word. What’s more, the book of Ecclesiastes also serves to normalize midlife in terms of ministry. For the narrator’s response to Qohelet is not an entirely new set of prescriptions that fundamentally differ from what anyone else needs, but it instead centers on what God has called his people to do regardless of life stage or type of struggle. He simply takes a basic message of the Scriptures, and contextualizes it to the struggles of midlife. From Ecclesiastes, then, it is clear that normalizing midlife is a biblical way of addressing the struggles of midlife. And thus, it supports the hypothesis that normalizing midlife will help it to become a season of spiritual formation.

This section then applied the hermeneutical lens of Ecclesiastes to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Assuming that the struggles of midlife are not outside the purview of God’s Word, and assuming that the basic message of the Scriptures can be contextualized to the struggles of midlife, it follows that the Gospel of Jesus Christ can deeply inform a midlife theology. The person and work of Jesus can be seen in terms of midlife dynamics, and thus set an example for

the midlifer to follow. And the promises of Jesus can specifically address midlife struggles, and thus give hope for the midlifer to hold onto.

Conclusion

The hypothesis of this thesis-project is that normalizing midlife in the church will help it to become a season of spiritual formation. This chapter explored the biblical and theological foundations for each part of this hypothesis in three sections.

The first section focused on the part about spiritual formation, and concluded that the goal of spiritual formation – for everyone, including those in midlife – is that the Holy Spirit forms a person’s spirit into the likeness of Christ. This, then, becomes the chief standard for measuring the outcomes of this thesis-project – whether or not it helped those in midlife to actually join the Spirit’s work of forming them into the likeness of Christ at the level of their spirit.

The second section of this chapter focused on that part of the hypothesis regarding midlife, and concluded that the notion of life stages and the notion of spiritual growth stages have scriptural validity. What’s more, contemporary wisdom suggests that progress in spiritual growth comes through struggle, and especially the kind of struggle that can happen at midlife. This, then, becomes the main context for doing the work of this thesis-project – helping those in midlife actively engage the struggles of midlife for the sake of spiritual growth and formation.

And finally, the third section of this chapter focused on that part of the hypothesis regarding normalization, and concluded that the Scriptures do indeed normalize midlife. In terms of awareness, the inclusion of Qohelet’s long lament in Ecclesiastes shows that there is

space for the midlifer's lament in the canon. God in his Word recognizes the struggles of midlife as real, valid, normal. And in terms of ministry, how the narrator of Ecclesiastes responds to Qohelet shows that addressing midlife struggles does not require specialized teaching or ministry, but merely requires contextualizing that teaching and ministry that is normal to the people of God. This, then, becomes the primary method for carrying out the efforts of this thesis-project – normalizing midlife in terms of awareness and ministry for the sake of spiritual growth and formation. Churches routinely normalize other stages of life – for example, recognizing and being aware of the distinct dynamics *of* childhood, and then contextualizing its ministry to those *in* childhood. This thesis-project seeks to do the same thing with midlife.

So the context for this thesis-project is the struggle of midlife. The method for addressing that struggle is by normalizing awareness and ministry. The goal – and therefore, the standard of measurement – for normalization is spiritual formation. The biblical and theological foundations explored in this chapter support the hypothesis that normalizing midlife in the church will indeed help it to become a season of spiritual formation.

Now the question: Would various thinkers and writers on the topic of spiritual formation at midlife agree? The next chapter – chapter 3 – presents a literature review of the topic.

CHAPTER 3: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The hypothesis of this thesis-project is that normalizing midlife in the church will help it to become a season of spiritual formation. This chapter reviews the current literature surrounding the topic of midlife – both in terms of understanding its dynamics, as well how to care for or minister to those in midlife – and presents four groups of conversation partners: secular journals and books, Roman Catholic and contemplative authors, broadly Evangelical and Protestant works, and sources that are more particularly Reformed Evangelical.¹

The first section of this chapter will introduce each group and highlight their distinctive contributions. The second section will explore how these four groups interact over key questions related to midlife: What is happening in midlife? How does one journey well through midlife? What can help and support those who journey through midlife?

Distinctive Contributions of Each Conversation Partner

This section will describe each of the four groups of conversation partners, surveying the range of contributors within each group, and then highlighting the distinctive contributions of that group. More will be said about each group's distinctive contributions in the next section when the groups interact with one another over various midlife questions.

1. A fifth category of scholarly works in psychology will not be considered in this chapter, though many from the other four conversation partners do cite and refer to them.

Secular Journals and Books

Much has been written in secular literature regarding midlife. Articles are regularly published in magazines such as *Time* and *The Atlantic*, as well as in newspapers such as *The New York Times*. Entries can be found in the *Harvard Business Review*. And in the past few years, multiple books have been published with titles such as *The Happiness Curve: Why Life Gets Better After 50*, and *Life Reimagined: The Science, Art, and Opportunity of Midlife*.²

The distinctive contributions of this group are many. Secular journals and books are often well-researched, citing everything from academic journals to research findings to interviews with experts. They are also chock-full of stories told in narrative form of people struggling in their own ways through midlife. And this includes their own stories. Jonathan Rauch describes midlife as a “years-long slump when instead of savoring our accomplishments, we question and reject them, feeling least fulfilled just when we have most cause for satisfaction,” and then he begins his own story with “[this] pattern applied to me, and with a vengeance.”³ Likewise, Arthur Brooks reflects in *The Atlantic* that researching and writing about midlife for him was like “a surgeon taking out his own appendix.”⁴ Rauch and Brooks exemplify the often self-reflective quality of secular midlife articles and books.

A final distinctive contribution of this conversation partner is that while a few writers are simply trying to articulate the midlife experience, most come around to offering either

2. Notably, these books and many like them are written by journalists, perhaps beginning with Gail Sheehy, who wrote both *Passages: Predictable Crises of Adult Life* in 1977 and *New Passages: Mapping Your Life Across Time* in 1996.

3. Jonathan Rauch, *The Happiness Curve: Why Life Gets Better After 50* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2018), 14.

4. Arthur Brooks, “Your Work Peak Is Earlier Than You Think,” *The Atlantic*, July 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2019/07/work-peak-professional-decline/590650>.

practical advice or helpful insight or both.⁵ Examples of practical advice are when secular works topically address the various difficulties that happen during midlife (e.g. memory decline or the dwindling of friendships or marital ennui or needing a sense of purpose), and then offer expert-led and researched solutions (e.g. how to retrain the brain or how to combat loneliness or how to introduce novelty into a marriage or how to set goals for greater accomplishments).⁶

In terms of helpful insight, perhaps the most helpful recent discovery is what secular journals and books are calling “the happiness curve.”⁷ This is the well-documented cross-cultural phenomenon where happiness for most people dips lowest at midlife, regardless of circumstances.⁸ The purpose of this dip is then to “repurpose us for a changing role in society as we age, a role that is less about ambition and competition, and more about connection and compassion.”⁹ This insight is helpful because it reframes the struggle of midlife as “normal and nonpathological and even, in its own perverse way, constructive.”¹⁰ Knowing this will not necessarily keep the midlifer from experiencing disappointment or dissatisfaction, but it can

5. See Pamela Druckerman, “How to Survive Your 40s,” *New York Times*, May 4, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/04/opinion/sunday/how-to-survive-your-40s.html>. Contrary to the article’s title, Druckerman does not offer much advice, only a description – albeit an insightful one – of the midlife experience.

6. For a prime example of this, see Barbara Bradley Hagerty, *Life Reimagined: The Science, Art, and Opportunity of Midlife* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2016). While Hagerty herself is a Christian (she is a member of an Anglican church), she writes this book from a secular perspective.

7. See Rauch, *The Happiness Curve*. Also Brooks, “Your Work Peak Is Earlier Than You Think.” And Hannes Schwandt, “Why So Many of Us Experience a Midlife Crisis,” *Harvard Business Review*, April 20, 2015, <https://hbr.org/2015/04/why-so-many-of-us-experience-a-midlife-crisis>.

8. “[T]he midlife dip in happiness shows up even after factoring out the stresses and strains and ups and downs of life. In fact, it shows up especially after factoring out the stresses and strains and ups and downs of life.” Rauch, *The Happiness Curve*, 13–14.

9. Rauch, *The Happiness Curve*, 18.

10. Rauch, *The Happiness Curve*, 213.

help the midlifer feel less ashamed or abnormal when experiencing disappointment or dissatisfaction.¹¹ Also, knowing that the struggle of midlife does come to an end – and is even meant to be constructive – can help midlifers patiently endure.¹²

As a whole, the distinctive contribution of secular journals and books is that they tend to be well-researched, filled with relatable stories, are self-reflective, and offer practical advice and helpful insight.

Roman Catholic and Contemplative Authors

There are many Roman Catholic and contemplative authors who have also written about midlife. More recently, Richard Rohr has written his 2011 book on the topic, titled *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*. And Rosemarie Carfagna has contributed her 2008 work, *Contemplation and Midlife Crisis*. Also, Carolyn Gratton, in her book *The Art of Spiritual Guidance*, describes midlife as the “classic crisis,” and references at least a half dozen other Catholic and contemplative sources in her endnotes.¹³

The distinctive contribution of this group is different from the contributions of the secular journals and books mentioned above. While the writings of Roman Catholic and contemplative authors can also be well-researched, they tend to lean more heavily on works of psychology (e.g. Carfagna cites Jungian psychoanalyst James Hollis quite a bit) or literature (e.g.

11. “I have seen again and again, while researching this book, the relief people feel when they have a nonjudgmental, fact-based conversation about midlife malaise. I see the surprise and smiles when they hear that the happiness curve is normal and seen around the world.” Rauch, *The Happiness Curve*, 212.

12. See Rauch, *The Happiness Curve*, 185.

13. Carolyn Gratton, *The Art of Spiritual Guidance* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1992), 45.

Richard Rohr uses *The Odyssey* as a paradigmatic narrative). If they do include stories of people going through crisis, they are usually not contemporary figures but historical figures such as Thomas Merton or Teresa of Avila or CS Lewis. What's more, the authors of these works are hardly ever self-reflective in their writing; they do not divulge much about their own midlife journeys.¹⁴ And in terms of practical advice or helpful insight, this conversation partner leans most heavily on the latter.

What kind of helpful insights do Roman Catholic and contemplative works offer? It is their exploration of midlife spirituality that is indeed profound. For many in this group of conversation partners, midlife is when the strengths and assets of the first half of life begin to "fall apart and show themselves to be wanting in some way."¹⁵ It is at this point that the individual is ready for change:

Sooner or later, if you are on any classic "spiritual schedule," some event, person, death, idea, or relationship will enter your life that you simply cannot deal with, using your present skill set, your acquired knowledge, or your strong willpower. Spiritually speaking, you will be, you must be, led to the edge of your own private resources. At that point you will stumble over a necessary stumbling stone, as Isaiah calls it; or to state it in our language here, you will and you must "lose" something. This is the only way that Life-Fate-God-Grace-Mystery can get you to change, let go of your egocentric preoccupations, and go on the further and larger journey.¹⁶

14. Hagberg and Guelich's *The Critical Journey* would be an exception, if it is considered part of the "Roman Catholic and contemplative authors" category.

15. Richard Rohr, *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011), xix. Rosemarie Carfagna describes how this leads to a "crisis of limits," a "crisis of meaning," and/or a "crisis of faith." See Rosemarie Carfagna, *Contemplation and Midlife Crisis: Examples from Classical and Contemporary Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 2008), 24.

16. Rohr, *Falling Upward*, 65–6. Carolyn Gratton says that this is when we are invited "into a time of questing and questioning." Gratton, *The Art of Spiritual Guidance*, 45.

The result of this change is to no longer live out of a “false self,” but to live into one’s “true self” and to “find who you are ‘hidden [with Christ] in God,’ as Paul puts it.”¹⁷ The “false self” is the image constructed in the first stage of life to attain to first stage of life goals – success, ambition, popularity, and so on. It is not “bad, evil, or necessarily egocentric; it is just not ‘true.’”¹⁸ And the second half of life is not the total absence of a “false self” either. But the process of midlife is when the “false self” becomes less and less trusted, and even less and less desired.¹⁹ For under the weight of midlife difficulty and limitation and even failure, the mask of the “false self” begins to crack.²⁰ It becomes possible, then, for “more detachment... more reflectiveness, more trust in life. Persons can become more uniquely themselves.”²¹

As a whole, the distinctive contribution of Roman Catholic and contemplative authors is that they – compared to secular journals and books – tend to draw from a different well of research and personal stories. But more importantly, they provide profound insight about how the midlife struggle can catalyze spiritual growth. In many ways, the dynamic that they describe has similarities with the dynamic described by secular journals and books: the hardship of midlife is necessary for transforming the self into greater maturity. But for the

17. Rohr, *Falling Upward*, 130.

18. Rohr, *Falling Upward*, 127. Carfagna agrees: “Indeed, they have done nothing wrong. In fact, they have done everything right. Yet nothing that they treasured in the first half of life now satisfies.” Carfagna, *Contemplation and Midlife Crisis*, 41.

19. “In touch with God, we are free to relinquish any falsity with which we propped up the acquired, external self. We can live simply, forgive injuries, tolerate disappointments, and let go of useless anxieties.” Carfagna, *Contemplation and Midlife Crisis*, 38.

20. “With someone who is honestly living through and reflecting on this stage of life, an alert spiritual guide can recognize a time of special responsiveness to the Mystery and to the call of the person’s true self.” Gratton, *The Art of Spiritual Guidance*, 45.

21. Gratton, *The Art of Spiritual Guidance*, 46.

Roman Catholic and contemplative authors, the process of change is understood in spiritual terms and in relation to God.

Broadly Evangelical and Protestant Works

As with the previous group of conversation partners, this group consists of multiple contributors as well. Three will be presented here: Bob Buford's *Halftime: Moving from Success to Significance*, Jim Conway's *Men in Midlife Crisis*, and Michelle Van Loon's *Becoming Sage*.

This group also makes its own distinctive contributions. Similar to secular journals and books, these broadly Evangelical and Protestant works are also full of stories, and are self-reflective – the authors share about their own midlife journeys. But the sources and research that this group draws from differ from both secular journals and books, and Roman Catholic and contemplative authors. Buford's *Halftime*, for example, not only cites Christian psychologists such as Larry Crabb and Donald Joy, but it also references experts in the business world such as Peter Drucker and Laura Nash. This makes sense since the focus of his book is on the vocational impact of midlife dynamics. Van Loon's *Becoming Sage* is even more prolific in her sources, drawing from every group considered in this chapter. From within the secular group, she cites Barbara Bradley Hagerty.²² From within the Roman Catholic and contemplative group, she cites Richard Rohr and Henri Nouwen. From within the Reformed Evangelical group, she cites R. Kent Hughes and Tim Keller. And she also considers the work of psychologist James

22. As mentioned earlier, while Hagerty herself is a Christian, she writes *Life Reimagined* from a secular perspective.

Fowler, and even draws research from data-driven sources such as the Barna Group. It would seem, then, that many of the contributors in this broadly Evangelical and Protestant group are quite “ecumenical” in their research.

This group is heavily oriented towards giving practical advice. This does not mean that there is no insight or articulation of midlife dynamics. But ultimately, Buford’s *Halftime* reads like a workbook, complete with discussion questions and assignments. And the main body of Jim Conway’s *Men in Midlife Crisis* is sectioned off into topically-oriented chapters on how to navigate aging bodies, marriage struggles, and the like.²³ For those midlifers looking for a resource – and specifically, a Christian resource – on what to do about how they feel, this group of broadly Evangelical and Protestant works can be very helpful.

Van Loon’s *Becoming Sage* is an interesting combination of both practical advice and helpful insight. While she structures her book topically – similar to Conway – her takeaways for each chapter are not only about what to do, but are also about what to understand. In fact, in her opening chapters, she frames the midlife experience using Janet Hagberg and Robert Guelich’s “critical journey” model.²⁴ And then in her concluding chapter, she writes:

This book has focused on naming some of the key challenges we face as we seek to become sage in the second half of our lives. Midlife holds for us an invitation to move beyond the seemingly secure forms and comforting structures of faith Stages 1, 2, and 3.... By refusing the invitations to move into and beyond the uncharted territory of Stage 4 faith that comes disguised as often unwelcome changes in key areas of our lives, we are, in effect, pitching our tent in a faith stage we’re meant to outgrow.... But as we honor and integrate our past learning and experience and step into the darkness of

23. This is similar to how Barbara Bradley Hagerty structures her book *Life Reimagined*.

24. See chapter 2 of this thesis-project for an in-depth discussion of Hagberg and Guelich’s “critical journey” model.

Stage 4 faith, we will become free to run the rest of life's race. As we grow toward wisdom and wholeness, we will become Real.²⁵

Van Loon's book seems to repackage the insight of the Roman Catholic and contemplative group in order to offer it to the practically-driven audience of the broadly Evangelical and Protestant group.

As a whole, the distinctive contribution of this conversation partner is its inclusion of an even greater variety of sources, and its heavy orientation towards being practical.

Reformed Evangelical Sources

In contrast to the other groups of conversation partners, this group consists of only a few contributors. A careful search turns up only a few recent blog entries and podcasts by the likes of Russell Moore, John Piper, Tim Challies, and Mark Shaw, and only one book – Paul Tripp's *Lost in the Middle*, published in 2004. This is likely due to the fact that compared to the other groups mentioned above, the number of people who identify as Reformed Evangelical is very small.

Similar to the secular as well as the broadly Evangelical and Protestant groups, this group also makes use of relatable stories told in narrative form of people struggling in their own ways through midlife. And the authors of this group are self-reflective as well. But unlike the other groups, there is only a light use of outside sources. Russell Moore does reference Jonathan's Rauch's work as well as Will Storr's book *Selfie*, but by and large the contributors in this group base their comments primarily on their own experiences, cultural observations, and

25. Michelle Van Loon, *Becoming Sage: Cultivating Meaning, Purpose, and Spirituality in Midlife* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2020), 179–80.

knowledge of Scripture. For the blog entries and podcasts, this is perhaps largely due to the limitations of the format, but it is surprising that nowhere in Paul Tripp's ~350 page book does he cite a non-biblical source.²⁶

With that said, the distinctive contribution of this group is exactly in the strength of its biblical and theological focus. There is hardly any practical advice given, but a great deal of quality insight.²⁷ While broadly Evangelical and Protestant works do cite verses from the Bible, and while Roman Catholic and contemplative authors do write from a theological framework, it is the Reformed Evangelical group that is most explicitly oriented towards God.²⁸ In other words, for this group, it is less the case that God's Word is cited to support a conclusion, and it is more the case that a conclusion is drawn from the Scriptures.²⁹ It is less important that midlifers turn away from "false selves" to find their "true selves," and it is more important that

26. Paul Tripp does include quotes at the top of each of his chapters, but they are not discussed or incorporated into the body of his work.

27. Even Piper's advice to "get a half day away on a Saturday or a Sunday" is only meant so that the midlifer can "seek his face and know him and love him," and to bring the challenges of midlife and "put them in hands of God." John Piper, "My Midlife Crisis — and Counsel for Yours," *Ask Pastor John* (podcast transcript), Desiring God, March 19, 2018, <https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/my-midlife-crisis-and-counsel-for-yours>.

28. "How does all of this help us as we approach the experience of midlife? The revelation of God in Scripture is the only place to find real hope. He is the only one who is at once completely above everything that we face yet is intimately familiar with all of it by personal experience. We run to him because he is Lord over it all and has the power to help." Paul David Tripp, *Lost in the Middle: Midlife and the Grace of God* (Wapwallopen, PA: Shepherd Press, 2004), 20–1.

29. See Tripp, *Lost in the Middle*, 13–25. In Tripp's introductory chapter, he lays out an overall narrative of Scripture, and then applies the perspective of Scripture to the topic of midlife. This is opposite of other approaches that first explore the dynamics of midlife, and then find Scriptures to support the conclusions. "Only when we see the world exegeted as it really is, ourselves as we really are, God in all his glory, and the completeness of the Redeemer's work, can we have a balanced and functionally worthwhile perspective on anything." Tripp, *Lost in the Middle*, 23.

they turn away from idolatry to find themselves in Christ.³⁰ In Reformed literature, God is seen as less a means to some other end (e.g. spiritual maturity); rather, he is the end in itself.

Here is an example of how this distinction plays out. It begins with overlap. Paul Tripp writes, “When you have defined yourself horizontally (‘I *am* my family, job, marriage, children, possessions, appearance, friendships, career, successes, or position’) you are in big trouble.”³¹ His warning here is very similar to the contemplative warning against holding onto the “false self” created during the first half of life. And then Tripp continues: “When you enter the stage of life where those things, or your plans for acquiring them, are taken away, you become lost in identity confusion.”³² In contemplative language, this is similar to that midlife moment when the “false self” is challenged and found wanting. Tripp then counsels, “What we need in midlife is not a world that is utterly free of disappointment, aging, or regret. We need to get our identity right in order to survive these powerful experiences.”³³ One could read “getting our identity right” as the same as what the contemplatives call finding your “true self.” Up until this point, there is a great deal of overlap.

Where Reformed literature diverges, however, is its emphasis on the reason why the “false self” is a problem, and the ultimate purpose of the “true self.” Tripp concludes: “The identity struggles that rear their ugly heads during the tumult of midlife are really struggles of

30. “The Bible was given so that the God of the plot would be the God of your heart, and you would live with a deep and personal commitment to the success of his story.” Tripp, *Lost in the Middle*, 173.

31. Tripp, *Lost in the Middle*, 287.

32. Tripp, *Lost in the Middle*, 287.

33. Tripp, *Lost in the Middle*, 287.

worship.³⁴ In other words, the main problem of the “false self” is not the pain or difficulty it creates for the midlifer, but that it is a form of idolatry... for the false self is gives greater worth to things or identities other than God.³⁵ Likewise, the ultimate purpose of finding one’s “true self” is not to become a better person, but that “we are zealous for the one thing for which we were created; him.”³⁶

As with other conversation partners, Reformed Evangelical sources make use of relatable stories and are also self-reflective. And though they do not concern themselves with offering practical advice, this group is very strong in offering helpful insight. Indeed the most distinctive contribution of this group is its biblical and theological focus. With all that said, this group could stand to draw from a wider breadth of sources, and there is certainly space for more contributors to this group.

The Four Groups in Conversation about Midlife

This literature review presents four groups of conversation partners: secular journals and books, Roman Catholic and contemplative authors, broadly Evangelical and Protestant works, and sources that are more particularly Reformed Evangelical. The preceding section has already introduced each of these four groups, and has highlighted their respective distinctive

34. Tripp, *Lost in the Middle*, 287.

35. “[T]he struggle of midlife is fundamentally rooted in the idolatries of the heart.” Tripp, *Lost in the Middle*, 321.

36. Tripp, *Lost in the Middle*, 337. “And when your idols start to disappoint, you rejoice that is God showing you where they are not to crush you, but to welcome you into a fuller experience of him and of grace.” Russell Moore, “How Should I Prepare for a Midlife Crisis?” *Signposts with Russell Moore* (podcast transcript), May 4, 2018, <https://www.russellmoore.com/2018/05/04/signposts-midlife-crisis>. Other approaches would say that when idols start to disappoint, we should rejoice that God is welcoming us into our “true self.” But Moore says that God is welcoming us into a fuller experience of *God* and his grace.

contributions. This section, then, brings those four groups into conversation with each other regarding a few key questions on the topic of midlife.

What Is Happening in Midlife?

A Time of Change

Contributors from all four conversation partners agree that midlife is a time of internal change. According to Jonathan Rauch, who writes from a secular perspective, “midlife reboot is an ordinary and predictable developmental pathway.... [L]ike adolescence, it is a transition.”³⁷ Jim Conway, writing from a broadly evangelical perspective, agrees: “We need to see that a midlife transition is a natural developmental stage that is unavoidable. Escaping the midlife developmental crisis is about as likely as a child escaping adolescence.”³⁸ And then those who do go through this transition come out the other side deeply changed. Barbara Bradley Hagerty, who writes from a secular perspective, attests to this: “As I review my decade experiencing midlife and two-plus years studying it, I realize that I have changed on the surface... and at the core.”³⁹ And then from a Reformed Evangelical perspective, Paul Tripp shares this corroborating testimony: “I now know that my midlife crisis was not the end. I had gotten lost in the middle, but by God’s great grace I was not lost for long. The crisis was actually a rescue from the bondage to something that I didn’t even know had that kind of hold

37. Rauch, *The Happiness Curve*, 192.

38. Jim Conway, *Men in Midlife Crisis*, rev. ed. (Colorado Springs, CO: David C Cook, 1997), 35.

39. Hagerty, *Life Reimagined*, 355.

on me. And it wasn't just a rescue; it was a welcome to a brand new start."⁴⁰ From a Catholic contemplative perspective, Rosemarie Carfagna begins her book on midlife with a chapter on the dynamics of life transitions.⁴¹ And Bob Buford, another evangelical, titled his book *Halftime*, conceiving of the middle years as a transition from "success to significance."⁴² Regardless of perspective, a common theme across much of the recent and popular literature is that midlife is a time of transition through which someone is deeply changed.

Differing Models for How Midlife Change Happens

Where the conversation groups differ, however, are the models they propose for how change happens. For example, secular journals and books explore a multitude of models. One model is a neurological one that explains how the brain changes over the course of a person's life. Studies show that the brain's sensitivity towards and ability to process positive information and feelings remains about the same over time. But the brain's sensitivity towards and ability to process negative information and feelings follows a U-curve – rising to a peak point at midlife, and then deteriorating into old age.⁴³ This neurological model is meant to explain the internal change that occurs through the midlife transition – why at midlife there is that realization of one's mortality and its attending feelings of disappointment and dissatisfaction, but then why people are also able to come out of it.

40. Tripp, *Lost in the Middle*, 170.

41. Carfagna, *Contemplation and Midlife Crisis*, 1–23.

42. See Bob P. Buford, *Halftime: Moving from Success to Significance*, 20th anniversary ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008).

43. Rauch, *The Happiness Curve*, 97.

Somewhat underlying this neurological model is a secular socio-evolutionary model that attempts to explain the human experience of midlife by asking the question, “What justifies the continued longevity of people beyond reproductive age, when a purely Darwinian approach would simply discard them as no longer necessary for the survival of the species?” The answer is that “[o]ther things being equal, the aging process makes it *easier* to be wise in later life,” and that the tumult of midlife changes a person from being “striving and ambitious and competitive in youth” to a role “more oriented towards the good of society.”⁴⁴ This model sees the internal change of midlife transition to be a “social adaptation, a slow-motion reboot of our emotional software to repurpose us for a different role in society. It came into being because it helped our tribes survive and thrive.”⁴⁵

A third secular model is psychological one that drills down deeper into the human psyche. One example sees the midlife realization of one’s mortality as a necessary check against the youthful desire to acquire and accomplish. Such desire is useful prior to midlife, but then afterwards, “focusing on acquisition leads to attachment and vanity, which derail the search for happiness by obscuring one’s essential nature.”⁴⁶ Instead, “as we grow older, we shouldn’t acquire more, but rather strip things away to find our true selves – and thus, peace.”⁴⁷ Coming to terms with the midlife realization of one’s mortality and limitation is necessary for this internal change. For those who do come to terms with the fact that they can only have a limited impact on external change, they are those who learn to pursue internal

44. Rauch, *The Happiness Curve*, 161-2.

45. Rauch, *The Happiness Curve*, 163.

46. Brooks, “Your Work Peak Is Earlier Than You Think.”

47. Brooks, “Your Work Peak Is Earlier Than You Think.”

change instead.⁴⁸ For example, accepting the midlife disappointment of not being able to climb to the top of the ladder can lead to a change in ladders, which would be an internal change of life goals and determinations of happiness.

These three secular models seem to dovetail. From the socio-evolutionary angle, societies benefit from elders who are generative, unselfish, and other-focused. And so to help people mature in that direction, human neurology has evolved such that at midlife, people typically go through a season of disappointment and dissatisfaction so powerful that it forces a psychological re-orientation away from finding joy in building up one's own life, and towards finding joy in building up the lives of others. Of course, all of that could also be secondary causes ordained by God.

Roman Catholic and contemplative authors look to a model for change that is similar to the secular psychological model, but they introduce a theological dimension. According to their model, the midlife realization of one's mortality, limitations, flaws, and lack of ultimate control over life is also a spiritual realization.⁴⁹ And according to Thomas Merton, the hoped-for response to such a realization is a "renunciation of all deluded images of ourselves, all exaggerated estimates of our own capacities, in order to obey God's will as it comes to us in the difficult demands of life in its exacting truth."⁵⁰ After this renunciation, then, there is a "new

48. "The midpoint of life represents the moment of maximal conflict between our drive to seek external solutions to our emotional dilemmas and our recognition that ultimately they don't work." Belinda Luscombe, "Where Even the Best Marriages Are Hard: in the Middle," *Time Magazine*, February 19, 2018, 15.

49. "As the complexities of midlife throw us back on ourselves, we begin to comprehend our inability to solve them entirely on our own. We realized vividly our need for God, our total dependence on God... Both midlife crisis and spiritual maturity call for more being than doing. Both reveal the inadequacies of our active striving." Carfagna, *Contemplation and Midlife Crisis*, 66.

50. Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (New York: Image Books, 1969), 46–7. While Merton is not writing specifically about the midlife transition, he describes a very similar dynamic.

spiritual identity – the ‘self’ as recognized in the context of realities willed by God” – which comes about through “an unconditional and totally humble surrender to God, a total acceptance of ourselves and of our situation as willed by him.”⁵¹

Those broadly Evangelical and Protestant works that develop a model for change largely borrow from the Roman Catholic and contemplative perspective. But Reformed Evangelicals – while sharing some overlap with the Catholic contemplative model – also diverge in important ways.⁵² As mentioned above, the Reformed perspective sees God using midlife struggle to expose the idolatry of self and its inherent weakness, in order for his people to instead turn towards a true worship of him.⁵³ The emphasis is towards the glory of God, and not just the joy of man.

51. Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, 46-7.

52. Russell Moore tells a story of midlife change that has some overlap with the contemplative model: “I had a church that was looking at a potential pastor and the person on the Pastor Search Committee was talking to me because I was a recommendation for this person. He said, ‘Now he hit a very difficult time in his life and said that he was exhausted and he was tapped out and he had to make all sorts of adjustments in his life. Should we be worried about that?’ And I said, ‘That’s the very reason why you ought to call that guy as your pastor. Because he didn’t hit that point of disappointment or exhaustion or whatever and seek out affairs or substance abuse or cynicism and hardening. Instead, he really used it as a crisis. And he didn’t waste that crisis. He said, ‘Let me go back to first principles and figure out who God is to me. Let me figure out who I am in terms of the good news of the Gospel. And let me reorient and correct my life.’ That’s what discipleship is.” Moore, “How Should I Prepare for a Midlife Crisis?”

53. “If all you had to do in midlife was to admit that you had failed along the way, or to let go of some of your dreams, or accept that you were getting older, this period of time would not be so difficult. But the biggest problems of midlife are problems of the heart.... While midlife is certainly filled with disappointment and remorse, it is vital to see it as a period of rescue and reconciliation. A jealous God is fighting for your heart. He is unwilling to share your affection and adoration. He will do what is necessary to reclaim your worship. In those moments in midlife where you feel lost and alone, you must remember that you are not alone. Much of the pain that you feel is the pain of grace. You are being freed from things that held you fast. You are being loved and taken to the one place where the deepest joy and rest can be found.” Tripp, *Lost in the Middle*, 262–3.

What's more, the Reformed model of change tends to emphasize the importance of Scripture. Mark Shaw writes:

If the man is having this midlife crisis as a result of being triggered by his thoughts, then how is he going to steer himself out of it, especially without counseling or without the truth from the Word of God to confront his wrong thinking?... The world gives too much credit to the man's ability to pull himself out of the pit of his wrong thinking. The problem is that the man in a so-called midlife crisis is erroneously evaluating his life with unbiblical criteria and following his own heart's desires (Prov. 3:5-8). He cannot find answers from within because they are not there; he needs truth that comes from outside of himself – from God's Word.⁵⁴

While the Roman Catholic and contemplative group as well as the broadly Evangelical and Protestant group do not deny the importance of Scripture in ministering to those in midlife, it is the Reformed Evangelical group that strongly highlights it.

What the Midlifer Changes Into

Despite the variety of models for *how* change happens in midlife, there is a great deal of overlapping consensus across all groups on the kind of a person a midlifer changes *into* if they journey through midlife well.

From the secular perspective, Arthur Brooks writes in *The Atlantic*: "This is the stage... in which we purposefully focus less on professional ambition, and become more and more devoted to spirituality, service, and wisdom."⁵⁵ Barbara Bradley Hagerty adds that "those [in midlife] who thrive shift their energy and attention from seeking happiness to finding meaning,

54. Mark Shaw, "Understanding a Man's Middle-Age Crisis, Part 1," Biblical Counseling Coalition, September 12, 2018, <https://www.biblicalcounselingcoalition.org/2018/09/12/understanding-a-mans-middle-age-crisis-part-1>.

55. Brooks, "Your Work Peak Is Earlier Than You Think."

from achieving success to cherishing people and paying attention to moments.”⁵⁶ Carlo Strenger and Arie Ruttenburg describe those who have journeyed through midlife well as “[n]o longer riddled by the anxiety that they may not be good at anything, or by the need to prove that they are good at everything, [instead] they have the freedom that only self-knowledge can impart.”⁵⁷ Pamela Druckerman puts it bluntly: “The seminal journey of the 40s is from ‘everyone hates me’ to ‘they don’t really care.’”⁵⁸

From the Catholic and contemplative perspective, Richard Rohr characterizes those who have journeyed through midlife well as people who “do not have to stand out, make defining moves, or be better than anyone else on the dance floor.... [T]here is no need for strong or further definition. God has taken care of all that.”⁵⁹ As such, they are “eager and able to generate life from [their] own abundance and for the benefit of following generations.”⁶⁰ He adds that “[i]ronically, we are more than ever before in a position to change people – but we do not *need* to – and that makes all the difference.”⁶¹ And finally, he concludes that for people who have matured into the second half of life, “[y]our concern is not so much *to have what you love* anymore, but to *love what you have* – right now. This is a monumental change from the

56. Hagerty, *Life Reimagined*, 44. And even those in midlife who continue to pursue success, they have “learned to redefine success.” Hagerty, *Life Reimagined*, 26.

57. Carlo Strenger and Arie Ruttenburg, “The Existential Necessity of Midlife Change,” *Harvard Business Review*, February 2008, <https://hbr.org/2008/02/the-existential-necessity-of-midlife-change>.

58. Druckerman, “How to Survive Your 40s.”

59. Rohr, *Falling Upward*, 120.

60. Rohr, *Falling Upward*, 121.

61. Rohr, *Falling Upward*, 123.

first half of life, so much so that it is almost a litmus test of whether you are in the second half of life at all.”⁶² Rosemarie Carfagna would agree with Rohr’s assessment and expand upon it:

We are immeasurably more free than we were in the first half of life.... We have little or nothing to prove. Tolerance and acceptance grow. We extend to others the compassion we have received. We may be deeply humbled, but we are now indomitable. The spirit within us has encountered the God beyond us and discovered that we are inseparable. Regardless of circumstances or outcomes, we know that we are loved and cared for, and that *nothing* can separate us from the love of God. Having that awareness is having everything.⁶³

From the broadly Evangelical and Protestant perspective, Buford quotes Merton, and then says that a good midlife journey prepares a person to no longer “need to chase after things outside of you to find fulfillment,” not “money, fame, material possessions, and experiences.”⁶⁴ Also, those who make it through midlife well are people who come to accept who they are, not wishing they were a “completely different person,” but trusting that “God’s desire is for you to serve him just by being who you are, by using what he gave you to work with.”⁶⁵ Conway adds his own list of how he has changed: “the earlier self-pity is gone,” “I was enjoying a deep and pervading peace,” “I had a sensitive awareness of the loneliness in every human being,” and “I had a new confidence.”⁶⁶

Finally, according to Reformed Evangelical contributors, those who make it through midlife well end up cultivating “more wisdom and personal insight than you have ever had

62. Rohr, *Falling Upward*, 124.

63. Carfagna, *Contemplation and Midlife Crisis*, 45.

64. Buford, *Halftime*, 155.

65. Buford, *Halftime*, 155.

66. Conway, *Men in Midlife Crisis*, 335.

before.”⁶⁷ There is a “new humility, a new joy, and a new zeal.”⁶⁸ This person accepts that “I’m just not going to be everybody that people need me to be. God’s given me a certain calling, God’s given me certain responsibilities. And that’s what I have to do. And I can’t be everything to everybody.”⁶⁹ What’s more, they understand that midlife is a “time of trial that is designed to leave my faith in Christ stronger than it has ever been.”⁷⁰ There is a movement from focusing on “for the Bible tells me so” to “Jesus loves me... [n]ot just at the theological level, but at the visceral level in order to bring about peace.”⁷¹ Ultimately, God intends for the midlife journey to be a “time of refinement, where the character of God’s fullness dwells more and more in me.”⁷²

Across the board, these are the characteristics that describe what a person becomes when he or she journeys through midlife well: less anxiety and greater peace, less self-concern yet more self-awareness, less need to prove oneself and more acceptance of who one is; greater humility and wisdom and joy and love; greater service and blessing to others; and a greater spirituality, a greater awareness of God and his love, a greater surrender and trust to his will. Perhaps Van Loon summarizes this best when she considers the end result of the midlife process and says, “It looks like Jesus.”⁷³

67. Tripp, *Lost in the Middle*, 323.

68. Tripp, *Lost in the Middle*, 339.

69. Moore, “How Should I Prepare for a Midlife Crisis?”

70. Tripp, *Lost in the Middle*, 347.

71. Moore, “How Should I Prepare for a Midlife Crisis?”

72. Tripp, *Lost in the Middle*, 347.

73. Van Loon, *Becoming Sage*, 185.

What is happening in midlife? All of the conversation partners agree that it is a time of great change in a person. And while models that explain how this change happens vary from group to group, they all come back to agreement when envisioning the kind of character that a good midlife journey can produce.

How Does One Journey Well Through Midlife?

There Are Better and Worse Ways

If so much depends on journeying through midlife well, then how does one do that? All four of the conversation partners agree that there are better and worse ways to do this. It is better to be intentional about midlife, and worse to simply stumble through it. It is better to avoid poor and brash decisions, and worse to resort to them. It is better to engage with the process of midlife and worse to “turn to diversions” or “enter a sort of sleepwalking stage during which they force themselves to hold on until retirement.”⁷⁴ In fact, “escapes ultimately make midlife more difficult, and we get ourselves incredibly lost.”⁷⁵

Two Approaches to the Journey

But after this point of agreement, the four different conversation groups re-sort themselves into two approaches to the midlife journey. The first approach is to lean heavily on doing something. Contributors within both the secular and the broadly Evangelical and

74. Buford, *Halftime*, 67. Buford argues that “[n]one of these approaches will make your second half better than the first, and they may, in fact, make it worse.” Buford, *Halftime*, 67.

75. Tripp, *Lost in the Middle*, 313.

Protestant groups adopt this approach when the primary focus of their work is to give practical advice. The second approach is to lean heavily on understanding something. Contributors within the secular, the Catholic and contemplative, and the Reformed groups adopt this approach when the primary focus of their work is to offer helpful insight.

Here, the difference is a matter of degree rather than absolutes, for certainly the authors that focus on giving practical advice also reference helpful insight, and the authors that focus on offering helpful insight can also dip their toes into giving practical advice. But the degree matters in terms of impact upon the reader. For example, while Hagerty does talk about the need for perspective change, her final conclusion is that midlifers need to “engage life with verve”:⁷⁶

Every idea in this book runs against our natural tendency to want to relax, take it easy, reward ourselves for decades of work and child rearing. Our default mode at midlife is entropy. But default is not destiny, and on this, the research is unequivocal: For every fork in the road, you are almost invariably better off making the harder choice. Harder in the moment, that is, but easier over the years, as your body and mind remain strong.... Yes, it's hard. Yes, it's worth it.⁷⁷

Hagerty's emphasis here leaves the reader with the sense that the most important thing a midlifer can do is engage and put in more effort.⁷⁸ By contrast, Rauch's concluding chapters focus less on what a midlifer can do, and more on what a midlifer should understand: understand that midlife struggles are normal, understand that “I don't have to be perfect today,” understand that “being present” through mindfulness can deescalate the feelings of

76. Hagerty, *Life Reimagined*, 356.

77. Hagerty, *Life Reimagined*, 356.

78. Hagerty is not alone in this. Christian “practical advice-givers” such as Buford and Conway fall into this as well. Though they may not intend to accent human effort in response to the challenges of midlife, that can easily become the unintended effect of their approach.

fear and anxiety and disappointment.⁷⁹ And then his “most important wisdom of all”: things will get better, so just wait.⁸⁰ And then he adds: “[W]aiting is not a passive strategy. It’s not doing nothing. Waiting is a way of working with time and letting time work for us.... In the end, waiting was most of what I did in my forties. Of all the measures I used, it proved the most effective.”⁸¹ Again, while Rauch does acknowledge practical things to do, his emphasis on what to understand leaves the reader with the sense that the most important thing is for a midlifer to change narratives, to see things differently.

These differences in approach, however, are not seen by all as equally good options. Catholic and contemplative writer Thomas Merton calls people to renounce “all the deluded images of ourselves, all exaggerated estimates of our own capacities.”⁸² This seems to undercut Hagerty’s emphasis on ratcheting up one’s engagement and putting in the effort. Richard Rohr would also be cautious, perhaps wondering if engagement and putting in the effort is simply reverting to first half of life tactics? Even Rauch seems to suggest that the “do something” approach can be counterproductive at midlife:

Lots of stratagems can help people who are languishing at the bottom of the U. Yet, at the end of the day, the currents we battle there run strong and deep, and, in real life, the countermeasures at our disposal can alleviate the dissatisfaction, but are unlikely to eliminate it. I am not even sure eliminating it is a good idea. Remember: the happiness curve, however, unpleasant at its nadir, seems to be part of a healthy and important personal (and social) transition. If we could drink a potion and make it go away, we might find ourselves much the poorer later on in life.⁸³

79. Rauch, *The Happiness Curve*, 170ff.

80. Rauch, *The Happiness Curve*, 184.

81. Rauch, *The Happiness Curve*, 185.

82. Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, 46.

83. Rauch, *The Happiness Curve*, 184–5.

Finally, Tripp argues that “[w]e need more than practical insight on the typical things that people struggle with during the midlife years. We need more than compassion and encouragement. What we need is the big picture.”⁸⁴

How to Journey Well

What, then, is this big picture? What insight or understanding – what internal narrative change – must a midlifer experience in order to journey through midlife well?

Regarding aging and death

For one, midlifers must come to terms with aging; they must accept that one day they will die.⁸⁵ This may seem obvious, but human beings regularly attempt to deny this reality.⁸⁶ Indeed, there are a plethora of cultural influences that would support this attempt at denial.⁸⁷ And yet, to deny one’s mortality is to deny the midlife transition that comes as a result of realizing one’s mortality. And to deny that a midlife transition is happening is to deny the deep change that such a transition brings: “I suspect that my own terror of professional decline is rooted in a fear of death – a fear that, even if it is not conscious, motivates me to act as if death

84. Tripp, *Lost in the Middle*, 297.

85. “No man will successfully make it through the midlife transition until he can comfortably accept his aging and let go of the fantasy of being twenty-eight – or whatever is your favorite age.” Conway, *Men in Midlife Crisis*, 58.

86. “Eventually, in subtle and not-so-subtle ways, we begin to experience the death of our invincibility. Yet, we are so skilled at not facing the facts.” Tripp, *Lost in the Middle*, 82.

87. Tripp points to the “youthification” and affluence of Western culture, as well as the rise of leisure and cosmetic technology. See Tripp, *Lost in the Middle*, 82ff.

will never come by denying any degradation in my résumé virtues. This denial is destructive, because it leads me to ignore the eulogy virtues that bring me the greatest joy.”⁸⁸

What can help midlifers come to terms with their mortality is remembering the big picture – the big picture of biblical anthropology and eschatology. Biblical anthropology holds that human beings are not just body but also soul, not just what is external and visible but also what is internal and invisible.⁸⁹ Remembering this allows the midlifer to “hold physical things in their proper place.... The earth-suit of my body is wearing out, but that is not the end of me.”⁹⁰ And then biblical eschatology takes this anthropology and leverages it towards hope:

Viewing myself from the vantage point of eternity helps me to see both processes at once. Yes, the physical me is in the process of aging and decay, but that is okay because after the body has served its earth-bound purpose, I will be given another body for eternity. And even though my body is wasting away, my heart is progressively being changed and renewed. I am growing in strength and character, and therefore I am being prepared to live forever in paradise with my Lord.... Only when viewed from eternity can physical aging be put in its proper place.⁹¹

Remembering the big picture can help midlifers come to terms with their mortality, which then motivates them to re-orient their lives away from the “résumé virtues” of earthly success and achievement, and towards the “eulogy virtues” of spirituality, service, and wisdom.⁹²

Regarding limitations

88. Brooks, “Your Work Peak Is Earlier Than You Think.”

89. This biblical anthropology is explored in greater detail in chapter 2 of this thesis-project.

90. Tripp, *Lost in the Middle*, 88.

91. Tripp, *Lost in the Middle*, 89.

92. Brooks, “Your Work Peak Is Earlier Than You Think.” What Brooks calls “résumé virtues” is essentially those things people value in their first half of life. And “eulogy virtues” are those things people ought to value in their second half of life.

Second, midlifers must become more accepting of their limitations. What are these limitations? Some limitations are externally imposed. For example, there is the limitation of life duration. As Russell Moore puts it:

When you were in your 20s, even if you're really frustrated with your love life, or you're frustrated with your work life, you've got all of this possibility in front of you and you think, "Well, things can get better." But there comes a point where you start to realize, "Wait a minute, time's running out. I don't think it's going to get any better with my love life or with my work life or with whatever goals that I have set for myself or have been set for me by my culture, about my family, about my church, or whomever."⁹³

Other limitations, however, are set by one's own choices and decisions made in the first half of life. For example, spending one's first forty years going into debt in order to become an artist will make it that much more difficult to pay for medical school and become a doctor in the next forty years.⁹⁴ Cautioning their readers, Strenger and Ruttenberg argue that some midlife advice – especially regarding dramatic changes in career – “tries to sell the illusion that if people have enough vision and willpower, they can be anything or anybody they want to be.”⁹⁵ In contrast, they would instead counsel the midlife individual to “stay open to the range of possibilities their experience has actually qualified them for—but remain realistic about what they can achieve.”⁹⁶ In other words, accept the reality of limitation. Buford broadens this same concept

93. Moore, “How Should I Prepare for a Midlife Crisis?”

94. “Mid-life limits force us to notice how our commitments to persons, priorities, and purpose have already shaped and formed us. We see how some of our life goals have been blocked by unfinished business from the past.” Gratton, *The Art of Spiritual Guidance*, 45.

95. Strenger and Ruttenberg, “The Existential Necessity of Midlife Change.”

96. Strenger and Ruttenberg, “The Existential Necessity of Midlife Change.”

beyond career concerns and counsels the midlife individual to “respect externals... be at peace with those things that we cannot change and that will be with us forever.”⁹⁷

What can help midlifers become more accepting of their limitations is remembering the big picture. On the one hand, there is the big picture of the Fall.⁹⁸ It is in fallen Adam that humanity faces the limitations of an externally imposed toil and limited life duration. And it is in fallen Adam that humanity faces limitations because of one’s own choices. What this means is that self-inflicted limitations – as difficult as they may be – are now the human condition. Knowing this can help the midlifer be more accepting of his or her limitations. On the other hand, there is the big picture of God’s work in spiritual renewal. For the benefit of accepting one’s limitations is it allows the midlifer to experience the internal and spiritual change that midlife transition is all about:

Perilous warnings notwithstanding, the crisis of limits conceals an elusive gift: a chance to stand still and reassess our lives. Because limits impede us from going further, we are, at least for the moment, stuck in place. This implacable interruption in our progress allows long suppressed questions to emerge. Another part of us senses what lies ahead. It is the spirit, and it will not wait.⁹⁹

And this internal and spiritual change can be joyful. Indeed, Tripp encourages his readers to say with the Apostle Paul, “Yes, outwardly I am wasting away, but I have real hope and real joy, because inwardly I am being renewed every day.”¹⁰⁰ Remembering the big picture of both the

97. Buford, *Halftime*, 148.

98. “So when God says to Adam, ‘You will bring bread from the earth but you will do so with the earth fighting you with thorns and thistles, you will give birth to the next generation and cultivate and nurture the next generation. But you will do so with the pains that come with childbirth and then the pains of that snake striking at the heel of your child.’ We have that sense of frustration that is present there.” Moore, “How Should I Prepare for a Midlife Crisis?”

99. Carfagna, *Contemplation and Midlife Crisis*, 26.

100. Tripp, *Lost in the Middle*, 102.

Fall and of God's work in renewal can help midlifers become more accepting of their limitations.

Regarding flaws and failures

Third, midlifers must admit to their flaws and failures. This involves *accepting* one's flaws and failures, but it is not the same as *justifying* them. As Buford notes: "This doesn't mean that you are proud of all you've done or that you would change nothing in your life if you could.... The key is to keep those things in perspective and accept them as an inevitable part of growth."¹⁰¹ The value of admitting to one's flaws and failures is it allows a person to also learn and grow from them.

Perhaps another way of saying "admitting one's flaws and failures" is "confessing one's sins." According to Tripp, "[c]onfession is... owning responsibility before God and the appropriate people (those whom my sin and failure has affected)."¹⁰² To admit to one's flaws and failures, then, is to confess them. But confession, Tripp is careful to add, is also a "refusing to be stuck in our regrets, and refusing to give up hope. It is believing that not only does God forgive me, but he has promised to change me."¹⁰³ Remembering this big picture of God's forgiveness and sanctifying work can help the midlifer admit to his or her own flaws and failures. For it gives hope that doing the hard work of confession will produce something good and worth it.

101. Buford, *Halftime*, 68.

102. Tripp, *Lost in the Middle*, 124.

103. Tripp, *Lost in the Middle*, 124.

Regarding the illusion of control

Finally, those at midlife must relinquish the illusion of control.¹⁰⁴ The way Rauch puts it – from his secular perspective – is this: “In the Voyage of Life, you are a plaything of forces larger than yourself, borne upon a stream you cannot control. So *relinquish* control. Trust the river. Trust time.”¹⁰⁵ Tripp, however – from his Reformed perspective – would say, “Trust God.”

And this is how he keeps the big picture in mind. For to him, the struggle of midlife is not because of Rauch’s “forces larger than yourself,” but because of a God who has “carefully administrated every detail of it.”¹⁰⁶ And then remembering the big picture of this God who is so intimately involved allows the midlifer to let go of the illusion of control: “It is hard, but this very death of our claim on our lives is what turns a midlife moment into a gracious reordering of control, which will in turn deepen our rest, worship, and love for our Lord.”¹⁰⁷

This relinquishment of control to God directly addresses the midlife struggle of disappointment and dissatisfaction. For “[t]he surrender that midlife calls for often amounts to relinquishing goals we had previously struggled mightily to attain. The surprise that waits us on the other side of surrender is the fact that relinquishing those goals, insofar as it becomes clear that they are unattainable, frees us rather than frustrates us.”¹⁰⁸ In relinquishing control to

104. “With its tensions and anxiety over the loss of familiar ways of doing and being, mid-age forces a choice between clinging fearfully to the past and freely letting go of uncertainties to accept the invitation of the future.” Gratton, *The Art of Spiritual Guidance*, 45.

105. Rauch, *The Happiness Curve*, 185.

106. Tripp, *Lost in the Middle*, 222.

107. Tripp, *Lost in the Middle*, 222.

108. Carfagna, *Contemplation and Midlife Crisis*, 109.

God, the midlifer lets go of his or her disappointments and dissatisfactions in life, and experiences the freedom that comes with greater humility before God and greater trust in his good plan.

So how does one journey well through midlife? Prior to midlife, none of these things would have felt acceptable at all – aging and death, personal limitation, flaw and failure, control as only an illusion. But at midlife, the individual is brought face to face with many of these realities, if not all of them. One may attempt to deny or escape these realities, but journeying well through midlife means coming to terms with aging and death, accepting personal limitation, admitting to flaw and failure, and relinquishing the illusion of control. When midlifers commit to journeying well in these ways, they experience the character and spiritual growth that midlife promises. And what helps the midlifer journey well in these ways is remembering the big picture – the big picture of biblical anthropology and eschatology, the big picture of the Fall and God's work of renewal, the big picture of God's forgiveness and sanctifying work, and the big picture of a good God who is intimately involved in the details of life.

What Can Support Those Who Journey Through Midlife?

The final question to consider in this section changes the focus away from midlifers themselves to those who wish to care for and minister to them. What are ways to help those who journey through midlife? Broadly speaking, there are three answers: validating the experience, correcting the narrative, and mentorship and peer support.

Validating the Experience

All four groups of conversation partners agree that while much has already been written about midlife, that does not mean that the experience is widely acknowledged or validated by the broader culture.

A reason for this could be the ambivalence of the research community. Hagerty documents how researchers “looked and looked, but they just could not find evidence of an inevitable – or even common – midlife crisis.”¹⁰⁹ But then she goes on to say, “It is not that [midlife researchers] believe that *nothing* is going on. They do, although Lachman prefers to call it a ‘midlife checkup.’”¹¹⁰ Hagerty, for her part, concludes that “[g]enuine crisis at midlife, with its angst, its turbocharged car, and its wandering eye, afflicts few people. The vast majority bump along, stubbing their toes, coping, and laughing.”¹¹¹ But the overall ambiguity and ambivalence within the research community no doubt contributes to – or at least, does not correct – the problems of how the broader culture views midlife.

What is the problem with how the broader culture views midlife? According to Rauch: “Through no fault of its own, midlife crisis is the butt of a million jokes, as you can confirm online in a few seconds by doing an image search of *midlife crisis*. What comes up? Photo after photo of middle-aged men and red sports cars.”¹¹² And unfortunately, this mocking view of midlife can be isolating for those who are in midlife: “No one wants to be a punch line or a

109. Hagerty, *Life Reimagined*, 20.

110. Hagerty, *Life Reimagined*, 22.

111. Hagerty, *Life Reimagined*, 26.

112. Rauch, *The Happiness Curve*, 188.

cliché. No one wants to set off alarm bells about being on the edge of a second adolescence or a mental breakdown.”¹¹³

But even without the mockery, the broader culture still leaves very little room for supporting those who are journeying through midlife. According to Rohr, “[o]ur institutions and our expectations, including our churches, are almost entirely configured to encourage, support, reward, and validate the tasks of the first half of life.”¹¹⁴ Indeed, “[m]ost of us are never told that we can set out from the known and the familiar to take on a further journey.”¹¹⁵ Regarding what Rohr says about churches, Michelle Van Loon agrees: “I sought help and solace for my spiritual disorientation at church only to discover the focus on first-half-of-life issues such as marriage, parenting, or finances meant few were talking about spiritual formation in the second half of life.”¹¹⁶

Helping those who journey through midlife, then, begins with not mocking but validating their experience. It begins with acknowledging and not ignoring this very real and significant stage of life.

113. Rauch, *The Happiness Curve*, 189.

114. Rohr, *Falling Upward*, xvii.

115. Rohr, *Falling Upward*, xvii.

116. Van Loon, *Becoming Sage*, 44–5. See also Conway, *Men in Midlife Crisis*, 306–7.

Correcting the Narrative

But it's not enough to simply acknowledge and validate; there must also be understanding. Rauch notes that while the prevailing cultural narrative is that life gets better and better until some mid-point and then turns downwards, this "social story about normalcy... is at odds with reality."¹¹⁷ The reality that he refers to is the 'happiness curve' that he describes this way:

Young adulthood tends to be a period of natural excitement and, in the phrase Dickens made famous, great expectations, along with great uncertainty. Together, those feelings make for life satisfaction that can be high but also volatile and precarious. What comes next is a period of consolidation and achievement, but also of growing disappointment and declining optimism. The downturn is gradual, gentle, but cumulative, and it sinks into a trough, a frequently years-long slump when instead of savoring our accomplishments, we question and reject them, feeling least fulfilled just when we have most cause for satisfaction. Under the surface, though, the trough is really a *turn*, a change of emotional direction. Almost imperceptibly, our values shift, our expectations recalibrate, our brains reorganize, all in ways that lead to an upturn in late middle age and then to surprising happiness in late adulthood.¹¹⁸

According to Rauch, the general tendency in the curve of life is down and then up, with midlife being the lowest point. This is what all the evidence suggests is reality. But the prevailing cultural narrative is up and then down.

The unfortunate result is that when society continues to propagate this "outdated but still prevalent paradigm... we manufacture dismay and shame about a [midlife] transition."¹¹⁹ He explains the dynamics this way:

By expecting people to exhibit maximum mastery in midlife, we leave them to their own devices if they feel adrift and vulnerable. By leaving them to their own devices, we

117. Rauch, *The Happiness Curve*, 209.

118. Rauch, *The Happiness Curve*, 14.

119. Rauch, *The Happiness Curve*, 209.

increase their isolation and therefore their unhappiness. By telling them that their best years are behind them at age fifty, we make them gloomy about the future. In all of those ways, by telling the wrong story about adult development, we bait and set the midlife trap.¹²⁰

The antidote to this, then, is for society to correct the narrative. When the dynamics of midlife transition are rightly understood, then the result is a proper recalibration of people's expectations for their lives: "[T]he *story* we tell about aging and life satisfaction will comport with the lives we live."¹²¹ This proper recalibration can then help bring great relief to the dismay and shame mentioned above.

Mentorship and Peer Support

Validating the experience and correcting the narrative are what is necessary for helping and supporting those who journey through midlife. These must happen, however, not simply "out there" in the broader culture or in wider society, but in the context of real-life relationships – and in particular, in mentoring relationships and in peer relationships.

Mentoring relationships during and about midlife are important and valuable for a variety of reasons. Secular writer Hannes Schwandt suggests that those "in a mid-career low can learn from their older colleagues who already went through the valley and have emerged."¹²² Of course, Schwandt is focused particularly on the area of vocation, but his

120. Rauch, *The Happiness Curve*, 209.

121. Rauch, *The Happiness Curve*, 210.

122. Schwandt, "Why So Many of Us Experience a Midlife Crisis."

statement can also be applied more broadly. And indeed, Catholic contemplative author

Richard Rohr does just that:

First-half-of-life ‘naiveté’ includes a kind of excitement and happiness that is hard to let go of, unless you know there is an even deeper and tested kind of happiness out ahead of you. But you do not know that yet in the early years! Which is why those in the second half of life must tell you about it! Without elders, a society perishes socially and spiritually.¹²³

Those approaching midlife are typically not aware of what is to come. And even those who do have some awareness will still stand to benefit from someone who has gone before and has journeyed through it well themselves. Tim Challies, who writes from a Reformed perspective, concludes on a direr note that “we who have been through midlife, or who are there now, had better begin preparing [younger adults] for the sorrow, the despair, the ugly intrusion of reality that is looming in the not-too-distant future.”¹²⁴ Put more positively, Conway believes that as “pastors and leaders become more vocal and help people through midlife crisis, we will see a great deal of mature caring strength in the church.”¹²⁵

Peer relationships are also important. Of course, mutual friendships are a key support during *any* kind of trial.¹²⁶ But at midlife, attention towards cultivating friendships is all the more important for the very fact that midlife dynamics threaten friendship:

Middle age itself is a centrifugal force, mentally, physically, and emotionally draining. It is like a bankruptcy proceeding, of sorts. We prioritize the creditors of our time – caring

123. Rohr, *Falling Upward*, 112.

124. Tim Challies, “The Coming Millennial Midlife Crisis,” *Challies* (blog), June 26, 2019, <https://www.challies.com/articles/the-coming-millennial-midlife-crisis/>.

125. Conway, *Men in Midlife Crisis*, 309.

126. “[A]n abundance of research strongly suggests that happiness—not just in later years but across the life span—is tied directly to the health and plentifulness of one’s relationships.” Brooks, “Your Work Peak Is Earlier Than You Think.”

for partners and children and ailing parents, tending to work commitments – and if we need friends, then our colleagues at work will do in a pinch.... But maintaining close emotional ties with people who do not share our home or DNA is difficult, and rare.¹²⁷

Being a good friend requires putting in the time. But at midlife, the demands of family, work, and other pressures take away that time. And so while supportive peer relationships are important at any stage of life, it is at midlife when people all the more need a community of friends to intentionally come alongside of them... if simply for the fact that they cannot – or will not – put the time into friendship themselves.¹²⁸

But assuming that friends do put in the time to support and care for those who are journeying through life – what should they do with that time? Rauch suggests “that each of us create a safe space for the people in our own lives. By retiring our clichés about midlife crisis and listening and empathizing and sharing our stories, every one of us can make someone’s midlife transition less of a DIY project.”¹²⁹ In addition to listening and empathy, Conway calls for friends to encourage the midlifer to endure: “The man in his forties also needs to be encouraged to face similar issues. People need to stand alongside in support. Encourage the man not to run from the stress, but to let the developmental process mature him for the next stage of life.”¹³⁰ During this maturing process, Buford agrees that caring peers can help bring “perspective and accountability.”¹³¹ All in all, Hagerty observes that having a community of

127. Hagerty, *Life Reimagined*, 105.

128. “Friends are likely to get a lot of abuse during a man’s midlife crisis, but they are extremely important in helping him through this time.... One friend can turn be truly significant. One friend can turn the tide from hopelessness and despair toward restoration and meaning.” Conway, *Men in Midlife Crisis*, 309–11.

129. Rauch, *The Happiness Curve*, 213. “DIY” stands for “do-it-yourself.”

130. Conway, *Men in Midlife Crisis*, 69.

131. Buford, *Halftime*, 205.

support is often what distinguishes a well-journeyed midlife: “They had a partner who loved them, children who needed them and gave them meaning; they had close friends or family who filled their lives. The gift, and responsibility, of a relationship provided a shelter from the wind.”¹³²

If having a peer community of support is so important for helping people journey well through midlife, then what can facilitate the formation of such a community? Or are peers on their own when it comes to strengthening their friendships and supporting midlifers? Conway believes that churches have a role to play: “The church needs to become more vocal on this issue.... [For as] the church grows in acceptance, talks more freely about midlife... and offers genuine forgiveness to people who’ve failed, then some of these people will turn back to the church and find it to be a community of strength and support.”¹³³ When churches formally minister to those in midlife – perhaps similarly to how they might minister to those in adolescence or any other stage of life – it facilitates the formation of more informal communities of mutual peer support.

So what can support those who journey through midlife? It begins with not ignoring – and certainly not mocking – this very real and significant stage of life, but instead acknowledging and validating the experience. But then it continues beyond mere acknowledgment and validation into greater and better understanding. The narrative of what to expect in midlife needs to be corrected so that it more closely resembles what research shows actually happens. And then finally, all of this must happen in the context of real-life

132. Hagerty, *Life Reimagined*, 33.

133. Conway, *Men in Midlife Crisis*, 307–8.

relationships. Through peer friendships and mentorship, those in midlife can receive the support and guidance they need to journey well.

Conclusion

This chapter has reviewed some of the current literature surrounding the topic of midlife, and has presented these four groups of conversation partners: secular journals and books, Roman Catholic and contemplative authors, broadly Evangelical and Protestant works, and sources that are more particularly Reformed Evangelical.

All Four Groups Have Strengths and Weaknesses

The first section of this chapter introduced each group and highlighted their distinctive contributions to the conversation about midlife.

For example, the secular, the Catholic contemplative, and the broadly Evangelical groups all present well-researched work, and even draw from varying pools of sources. Reformed literature, on the other hand, seems to be weaker in this area.

When it comes to presenting relatable stories of people struggling through midlife in order to help readers understand and articulate their own struggles, it is the secular, broadly Evangelical, and Reformed groups that do a good job with that. Catholic contemplative works do tell the stories of historical figures, but those stories are harder to relate to.

If one is looking for practical advice on what to do in order to navigate the various difficulties associated with midlife, both the secular and broadly Evangelical groups are very strong in this area. But if one is looking for helpful insight, then attention should be turned to

the Catholic contemplative and Reformed groups. While secular sources can also be quite insightful, they are by definition not going to be intentionally helpful regarding growth in Christ.

Finally, while Reformed literature is perhaps most excellent in terms of providing a biblical grounding and a Godward orientation in its insight, much more can still be contributed by members of this group. A careful search of Reformed sources did not turn up nearly the same quantity of works as currently exists in the other three groups.

Literature Review Supports the Hypothesis

The second section of this chapter explored how these four groups might interact over key questions related to midlife.

For example, in response to the question, “What is happening in midlife?”, all of the conversation partners agree that it is a time of great change in a person. And while models that explain how this change happens vary from group to group, they all come back to agreement when envisioning the kind of character that a good midlife journey can produce.

In response to the question, “How does one journey well through midlife?”, all four groups seem to agree that journeying well through midlife means not trying to deny or escape the realities of midlife, but it instead means coming to terms with the midlife realization of aging and death, and accepting personal limitation, and admitting to flaw and failure, and relinquishing the illusion of control. Those who follow this path come to experience the character and spiritual growth that midlife promises.

But added to this, the Catholic contemplative group – and especially the Reformed Evangelical group – would also remind midlifers to keep the big picture in mind. Remember the

big picture of biblical anthropology and eschatology. Remember the big picture of the Fall and God's work of renewal. Remember the big picture of God's forgiveness and sanctifying work. And remember the big picture of a good God who is intimately involved in the details of life. It is this theological big picture that can greatly help the midlifer turn away from denial and escape, and turn towards acceptance and trust that God will use the struggles of midlife in beautifully redemptive ways.

And then finally, in response to the question, "What are ways to help others journey well through midlife?", all four groups seem to agree that it begins with acknowledging and validating this very real and significant stage of life. And on top of that, there needs to be some correction to the narrative surrounding midlife. And then all of this needs to manifest in the real-world relationships of mentorship and peer friendships.

Taken altogether, the current literature on midlife seems to support the hypothesis of this thesis-project, namely that normalizing midlife in the church – meaning, normalizing *awareness* about midlife, and normalizing *ministry* to midlife – will help it to become a season of spiritual formation. In their answer to the first question about what is happening in midlife, the collective consensus seems to be that something deep and spiritual is happening, and so midlife can indeed become a season of spiritual formation. In their answer to the second question regarding how one might journey well through midlife, the collective response seems to suggest that normalizing awareness is crucially important. More regular conversation about midlife dynamics and difficulties can help those struggling with midlife to better understand and accept what they are going through, and to even keep in mind the theological big picture that can help encourage them and comfort them as they go through it. And then in their

answer to the third question regarding what can help and support those who journey through midlife, the collective response seems to suggest that normalizing ministry is imperative.

Validating the reality and significance of a life stage, seeking to understand its dynamics so as to correct any false narratives, and building a community of peer and mentoring relationships is what churches already do for other life stages (e.g. adolescence). In other words, all of that is normal ministry. To do the same for those in midlife, then, would only be normalizing the church's ministry to that life stage. But it is exactly that kind of ministry that is imperative.

The next chapter – chapter 4 – details how a pilot version of just such a ministry has been implemented in a small-church context, as well as what tools were utilized to evaluate its impact on spiritual formation at midlife.

CHAPTER 4: PROJECT DESIGN

Introduction

What will help the people of City Line Church understand and experience midlife as a season of spiritual formation? This is the question that this thesis-project aims to address. The proposed answer – and thus the hypothesis of this thesis-project – is as follows: normalizing midlife within the church will help it become a season of spiritual formation.

The first chapter of this thesis-project introduced and discussed this hypothesis by describing the dynamics of midlife as they relate to spiritual formation, and then set it all in the context of City Line Church. The second chapter then explored the biblical and theological foundations of this hypothesis by presenting a theology of spiritual formation, of life stages and spiritual growth stages in general, and of midlife in particular. And then the third chapter reviewed some of the current and relevant literature, looking at how various groups of conversation partners contribute to a deeper understanding of spiritual formation at midlife.

This fourth chapter now explains the design of the project that was implemented to test the hypothesis. The first section of this chapter will present how the project was initially designed. The second section will explain how the project was actually implemented. The third section will focus on the research methods and tools that were used to gather data under the implemented project. And the final section will consider the limitations of the implemented project.

Initial Project Design

The initial project design for testing the above hypothesis was a one-group pre-test/post-test quasi-experiment for program evaluation. The program itself would be designed to normalize midlife in terms of awareness and ministry. In terms of awareness, the program curriculum would bring to the fore important topics related to spiritual formation at midlife (e.g. midlife dynamics and our experience of them, how the Spirit can form us through midlife, etc.). And in terms of ministry, the program delivery would utilize those normal spiritual formation practices mentioned earlier in chapter 2: Scripture study and prayer, application to-dos and reflection on them, and interaction in peer community.

Plan A: Retreat Format

Initially, the plan was to deliver the curriculum during the annual church-wide retreat that City Line hosts every February for an entire weekend.

The benefits of this approach would have been numerous. First, the retreat is usually well-attended, making it easy to gather a large sample size.¹ Second, because it is a weekend retreat, participant attrition is very limited. Third, the retreat is attended by the whole church (not just a subset), and so focusing the content of the retreat on spiritual formation at midlife would certainly normalize awareness about midlife issues. Fourth, the retreat is part of the normal ministry life of the church, and so would satisfy the requirement that the program normalize midlife ministry. Fifth, the retreat format is conducive to utilizing those normal spiritual formation practices mentioned above. There is ample time during the morning and

1. In previous years, retreat attendance was 51 adults in 2018, 56 adults in 2019, and 65 adults in 2020.

evening sessions to study the Scriptures together, to reflect and pray together, even to consider what application might look like. And lastly, it would have been relatively easy to implement research tools at both the start and end of the retreat. There would be no need to chase down missing questionnaires because participants would simply fill them out before leaving the retreat.

Unfortunately, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2021 weekend retreat was cancelled.

Plan B: Small Group Format

The next option for program delivery to be considered was through a series of online small group meetings. Instead of leading participants through the program curriculum in one weekend, it would be broken up into four one-hour long meetings over videoconference, and each meeting would be limited to five or six participants. The advantage of this delivery format is the more intimate setting that allows for a deeper use of the various spiritual formation practices: Scripture study, prayer, reflection, application, and in community.

But there were several significant drawbacks that ultimately made this approach unworkable. First, the test group size would have been substantially smaller. City Liners are much more used to making space in their schedules for the weekend retreat, but not for another series of small group meetings. Second, the risk of participant attrition would have also been greater. The vast majority of City Liners are willing to stay through the entirety of a weekend retreat, but it is easy to drop out or miss a meeting here or there during a small group series. Third, for a similar reason, it would have been very difficult to implement the research

tools. The attrition of small group participation would have also impacted attrition in filling out questionnaires and joining a focus group. Lastly, the breadth of participation would have diminished. Only those interested in the topic of spiritual formation at midlife would sign up for the small group meetings, thus leaving out those who are not interested but may have otherwise benefited from the program curriculum.

In the end, many of these concerns were realized. City Liners – already experiencing “Zoom fatigue” during the pandemic – were simply not interested in adding four more online meetings to their schedules.² And those that were often did not have overlapping schedules that would have allowed for them to meet as a small group. As a result, this small group option for program delivery was not pursued.

Actual Project Implementation

Ultimately, the program curriculum was delivered through a Lenten sermon series that was preached over the course of five weeks during the Sunday morning City Line worship service from February 21st through March 21st in 2021; these worship services were all online due to the pandemic.

Similar to the retreat format, this sermon series format had several benefits. First, the Sunday worship service is well-attended, and that made it easier to gather an adequate sample size.³ Second, because the Sunday worship service is attended by the whole church (not just a subset), focusing the sermon series on spiritual formation at midlife certainly normalized

2. Indeed, it was difficult enough to gather just six people together for one focus group meeting!

3. Average attendance for all five sermons was approximately 80 adults.

awareness about midlife issues. What's more, third, the sermon series format was able to reach a broader audience, potentially benefiting those who would have otherwise opted out of something like a small group discussion on midlife. And lastly, sermons are part of the normal ministry life of the church, and so this approach satisfied the requirement that the program normalize midlife ministry.

There were, however, a few drawbacks to the sermon series approach. The first is that attrition was still a concern. Just as participants can easily miss a small group meeting here or there, so they can also easily miss a Sunday sermon here or there. Fortunately, the relevant worship services were well enough attended that despite the attrition, there was still an adequate sample size for the project.

The second drawback to the sermon series approach is that the sermons were more lecture-based than a retreat or small group approach would have been. While the sermon series format allowed for a great deal of teaching to take place, it was less conducive for utilizing the whole range of spiritual formation practices. In an attempt to ameliorate this, the sermons incorporated brief times of open response using the online "chat" function. In other words, at several points during each sermon, I would pose a question, and then invite listeners to respond with answers that they would type and post real-time for everyone to see. This not only kept participants engaged, but it also enhanced the sense of community among the listeners. The sermons were also immediately followed by a time of prayer, during which listeners were encouraged to pray aloud in response to what they had just heard. And then at the end of each sermon, I posed two or three reflection questions that I also emailed out to the church directory so that people could continue to meditate on the topic throughout the rest of

the week. So while the sermon series format was not optimal for utilizing the whole range of spiritual formation practices, there were still some attempts made at incorporating as much of a range as possible.

A final drawback to the sermon series approach is that it did not make it easier to implement the research tools. Additional effort in the form of multiple reminder emails and announcements was thus required in order to secure responses to the questionnaires and to recruit enough participants for the focus group.

Despite all of the project design changes – from a retreat format to a small group format and finally landing on a sermon series format – the actual program implementation still fit within the general contours of the initial project design. For example, the goal was still to test the hypothesis of this thesis-project using a one-group pre-test/post-test quasi-experiment for program evaluation. The test group was still the members and regular attenders of City Line Church. A baseline questionnaire was still implemented pre-test. A follow-up questionnaire and a focus group were still implemented post-test. All of the data collected was still analyzed for program evaluation. And the program itself – the Lenten sermon series – still sought to help people understand and even experience spiritual formation at midlife.

What follows is a description of the three phases of program implementation.

Phase 1: Publicity and Baseline Questionnaire

On January 31, 2021, I began to announce during the Sunday worship service that the Lenten sermon series was going to be on the topic of spiritual formation at midlife. This announcement was also included in the church's weekly email newsletter.

This publicity served at least two functions. The first was that it began to normalize awareness about midlife in the church: midlife is something worth talking about, and even devoting an entire sermon series towards! The second was that it prepared the congregation to help with the research aspect of the project. The announcements not only highlighted the upcoming sermon series, but they also explained the purpose and importance of the questionnaires that would come before and after.

The next Sunday, on February 7th, I finalized the baseline questionnaire, and emailed the link for it to the church directory.⁴ The deadline for response was set at two weeks later – February 21st – which is also when I preached the first sermon of the Lenten series. Those who wished to participate in the anonymous questionnaire could do so by clicking on the link, which would then take them to a Google form for them to fill out. The third section of this chapter will say more about how this baseline questionnaire was developed.

In the days leading up to February 21st – which was the questionnaire deadline and the date of the first sermon in the sermon series – a couple reminders were emailed out, and then the questionnaire was closed to new responses by 9 AM that Sunday.

Phase 2: Preaching the Sermon Series

The curriculum developed for this thesis-project was delivered over the course of a five-week sermon series titled, “Spiritual Formation at Midlife.” What follows is an outline of the content that was preached in each sermon.

4. A copy of the baseline questionnaire can be found in Appendix A, also as a Google Form at this link: <https://forms.gle/vzFKdPcEz2BTWwBJA>.

February 21, 2021: “Spiritual Formation at Midlife: The Opportunity Before Us”

The primary goal of the first sermon was to give an introduction to midlife dynamics, and then to show how the season of midlife can be an opportunity for spiritual formation.⁵

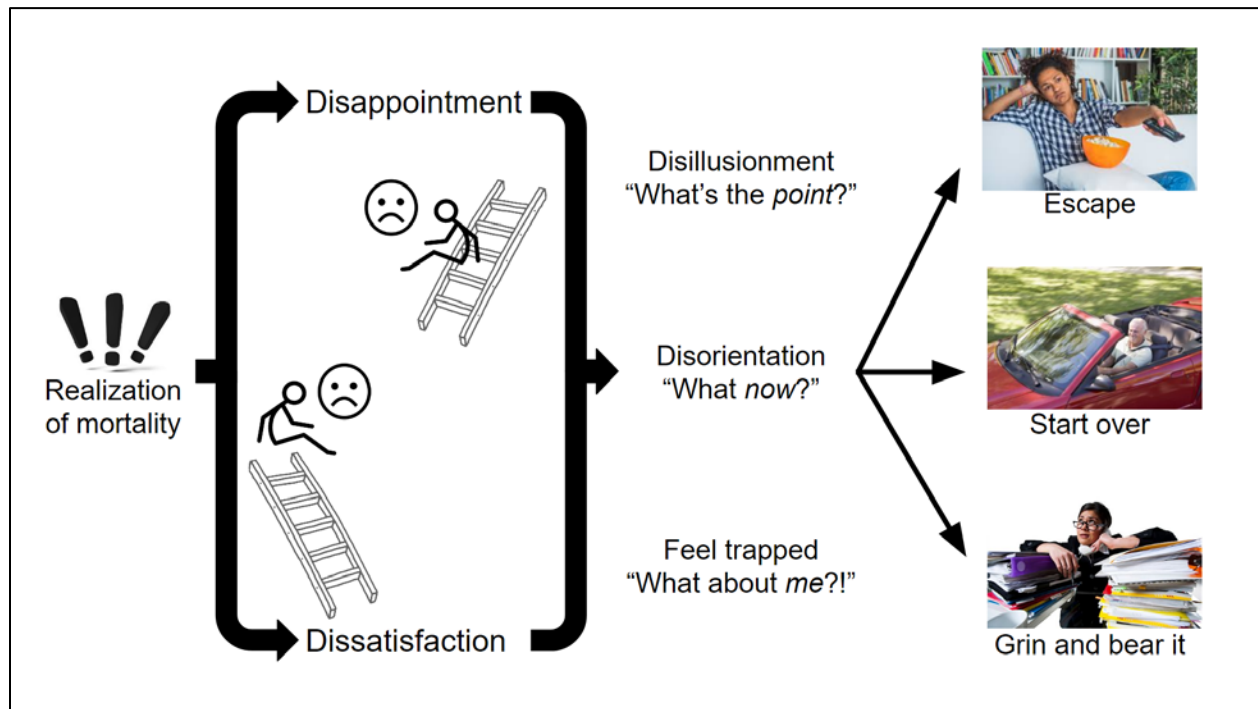
The sermon began with a first main point on the various ways of defining midlife – from midlife as “middle adulthood,” to midlife as a particular age range (e.g. roughly between the ages of 40 and 60), to midlife as a set of common experiences (e.g. dealing with new health issues, changing relationships with friends and family, etc.).

The second main point then honed in on the spiritual dynamics of midlife. For many at midlife, there is a profound realization of mortality that can be triggered in a variety of ways, but inevitably leads to a taking stock of life. This taking stock of life can then result in a deep experience of disappointment or a similarly deep experience of dissatisfaction, either of which then flows into feelings of disillusionment, disorientation, or feeling trapped. And then in response, a typical midlife reaction is to try to escape, or “start over,” or just “grin and bear it.”⁶ These are the typical spiritual dynamics of midlife.

5. Jason Hsu, “Spiritual Formation at Midlife: The Opportunity Before Us,” posted by City Line Church, February 21, 2021, video, https://citylinechurch.net/sermons_archive/the-opportunity-before-us. For a copy of the sermon notes, please see Appendix C.

6. See chapter 1 for more explanation of these dynamics.

Figure 1. Slide from February 21, 2021 Sermon, Describing Typical Spiritual Dynamics of Midlife



The third and final main point then framed all of this as an opportunity for spiritual formation. Not only do key authors about spiritual formation and midlife see it as such, but also the narrator of the book of Ecclesiastes. The narrator listens to Qohelet – the main speaker of Ecclesiastes – lament like a midlifer for about eleven chapters before he pronounces his evaluation on all that he has heard, and his conclusion is that Qohelet’s words are like “goads...given by one Shepherd.”⁷ In other words, God intends to use the experiences of midlife – even the difficult ones – to guide and shape and form his people in really good ways. And if God sees such an opportunity for spiritual formation at midlife, then that means his people can too!

7. Eccl 12:11.

What's more, the deepest questions of midlife have to do with dreams and limitations, hopes and disappointments, desire and dissatisfaction. In other words, the deepest questions of midlife are spiritual questions, and so provide rich opportunity for spiritual formation.

The sermon concluded with an invitation to continue with the sermon series. Yes, midlife is an opportunity for spiritual formation, but how? Keep listening and we'll learn together!

And then for reflection, the sermon left people to consider these two questions: 1.) Do you resonate with any of the midlife spiritual dynamics discussed in the second main point? And 2.) if you're not in midlife, then what do you think are the common experiences of the stage of life that you are in? And what are the spiritual challenges and opportunities there? The goal here was to help City Liners reflect on their own life experience, and to especially be attentive of the spiritual dynamics going on inside of them.

February 28, 2021: "Spiritual Formation at Midlife: Why It's Important"

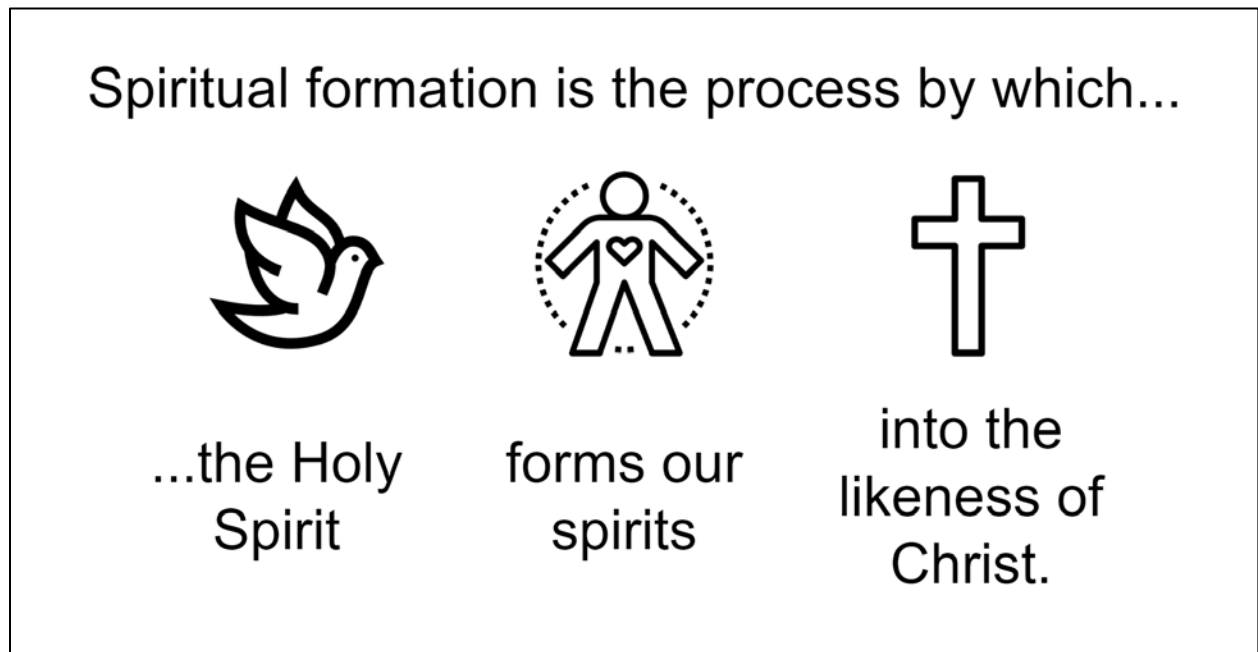
The primary goal of the second sermon was to define what spiritual formation is, and then to explain why – of all the things a midlifer might care about – spiritual formation should be the most important.⁸

The sermon began in its first main point by defining what spiritual formation is: it is the process by which the Holy Spirit forms our spirits into the image of Christ. Everyone has a spirit that is being formed, not just Christians. But what sets apart Christian spiritual formation is that

8. Jason Hsu, "Spiritual Formation at Midlife: Why It's Important," posted by City Line Church, February 28, 2021, video, https://citylinechurch.net/sermons_archive/why-its-important. For a copy of the sermon notes, please see Appendix D.

it is the Holy Spirit who does the forming, and it is into the image of Christ that the Christian is being formed into.

Figure 2. Slide from February 28, 2021 Sermon, Defining What Spiritual Formation Is



The sermon then quickly expounded Ephesians 4:11-16, showing how spiritual formation benefits the believer: when we are formed more into the image of Christ, then we are less tossed to and fro, and we are less vulnerable to things like deceit, and we are more secure in God's love for us. These are benefits to the believer.

But the sermon spent more time looking at how spiritual formation is about the importance and purposes and glory of God. For one, it is the age of the Spirit, and so it is his work that is moving history forward. To not engage in his work of spiritual formation, then, would be to be on the outside of what God is doing. Second, God cannot fix the world without

first fixing people, because it is the brokenness of people that has broken the world. Spiritual formation is important, then, because it is the process by which God fixes people (by making people more like Jesus). And then third, spiritual formation is for the glory of Christ. For when Jesus returns, he will usher in a kingdom where he does not stand alone, but he is surrounded by the innumerable redeemed who have been made into his image... the “firstborn among many brothers.”⁹

This emphasis of this sermon on the importance of spiritual formation is necessary not only because the series is about spiritual formation, but also because the world tends to prioritize external change over internal change. And so sometimes Christians – influenced by the world – can tend to prioritize alleviating suffering or making circumstances easier, without considering how God might be using suffering or difficult circumstances to form the spirit of the individual believer into the image of Christ.

This relates to midlife because at midlife, the believer is confronted with mortality and limitation. The believer is confronted with the reality that there is a suffering that will not be alleviated and a circumstance that will not be made easier – namely, death and all its ripple effects. Those who do not see the importance of spiritual formation, then, will have no hope in the face of this realization. But those who do see the importance of spiritual formation can hold on to the hope that God will use such external difficulties to produce an internal change that is actually vitally important.

The sermon concluded by looking at how a Christian might participate in this important work of spiritual formation. But rather than discussing different spiritual formation practices,

9. Rom 8:29.

this last main point of the sermon focused on a few key principles. First, to join in the work of the Spirit who is making God's people more like Christ, one must behold Christ. For 2 Corinthians 3:17-18 teaches that it is through beholding Christ that one becomes like Christ. And so whatever techniques or spiritual formation practices someone might use, the most important thing is that they help the believer behold Christ. Second, one cannot participate in spiritual formation without self-reflection and becoming aware of what's going on in his or her inner self. This is because spiritual formation is all about forming the spirit... is all about forming the inner self. And lastly, to participate in spiritual formation, one must suffer, for to become like Christ is to become like the suffering servant. This is not to say that suffering is good, only that suffering is redemptive; for through suffering the Lord refines the faith of his people.

For reflection, the sermon left people to consider these two sets of questions: 1.) What spiritual disciplines are you currently practicing? And are they helping you to behold Christ? If not, then what could you do to change that? And 2.) is it easy or difficult for you to reflect on yourself and articulate what's going on inside your spirit? Why do you think that is? The goal here was to help City Liners reflect on their own spiritual formation practices, and especially to expose if there is any resistance to doing the important internal work of spiritual formation.

March 7, 2021: “Spiritual Formation at Midlife: A Model for How It Happens”

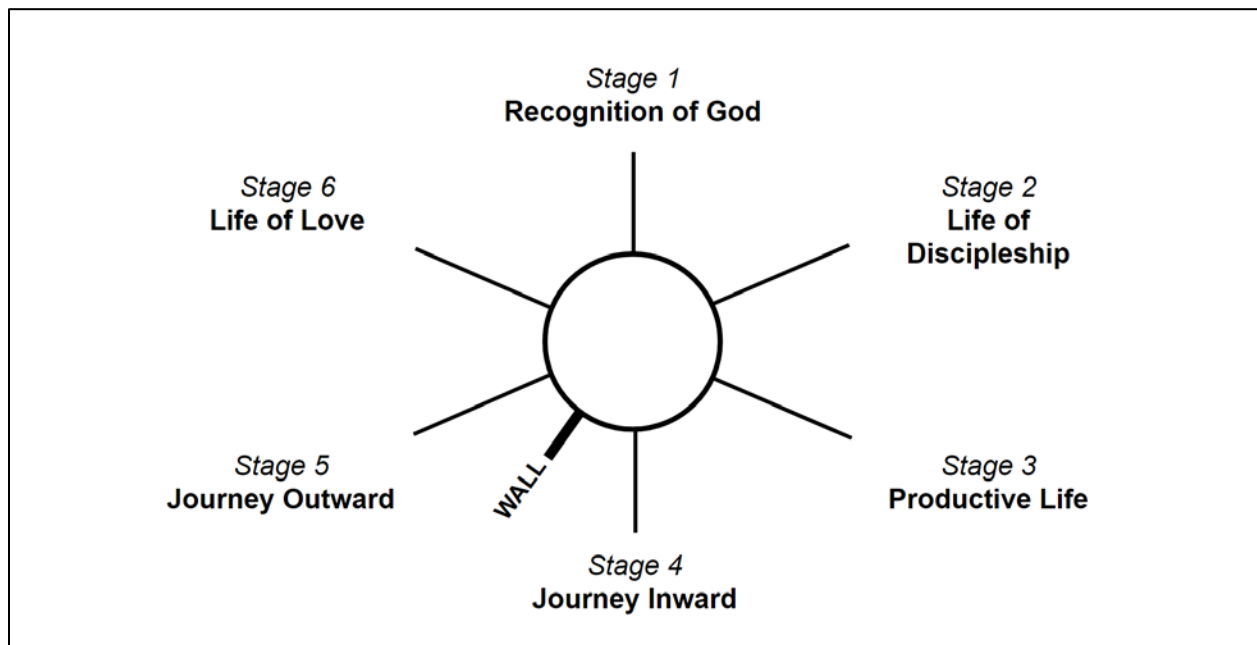
The primary goal of the third sermon was to provide a model for spiritual growth, and then to use the model to show how spiritual formation can happen at midlife.¹⁰

The model presented was Janet Hagberg and Robert Guelich’s “critical journey.”¹¹ The first main point of the sermon went into detail about the six stages of the journey, showing that the “critical journey” model is not a ladder with higher stages bringing someone closer to God, but it is a circle that while each stage builds on the prior, no stage is further away from or closer to God. For growth does not make someone more loved by God, for God’s love is entirely by grace. The first main point also spent some time describing the fourth stage of the “critical journey” model – called the “journey inward” – as well as what Hagberg and Guelich call the “wall.” At the “wall,” the kind of faith that believers had been building in their first three stages seems to fail, and this leads to a great deal of inner turmoil. But there at the “wall,” the believer is invited to grow through a new and profound surrendering in trust to God.

10. Jason Hsu, “Spiritual Formation at Midlife: A Model for How It Happens,” posted by City Line Church, March 7, 2021, video, https://citylinechurch.net/sermons_archive/a-model-for-how-it-happens. For a copy of the sermon notes, please see Appendix E.

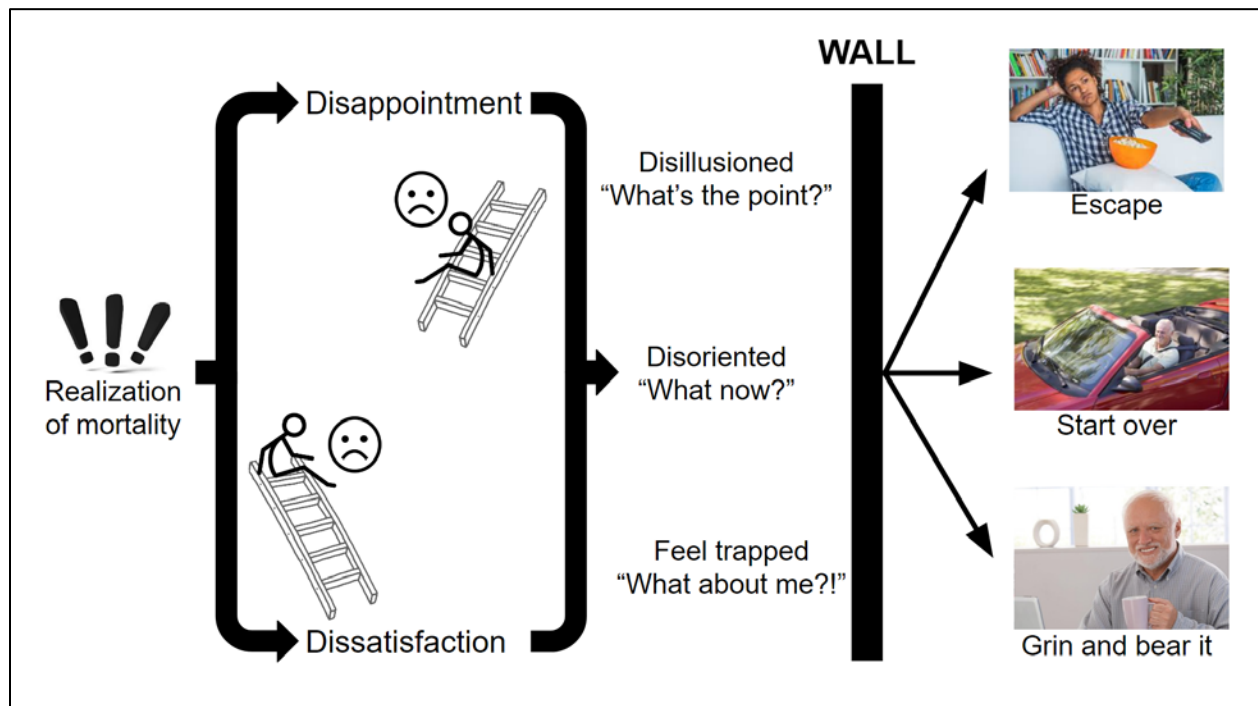
11. See chapter 2 for more explanation of the “critical journey.”

Figure 3. Slide from March 7, 2021 Sermon, Depicting Janet Hagberg and Robert Guelich's "Critical Journey" Model



The second main point of the sermon applied this model to spiritual formation at midlife, comparing the inner turmoil of midlife (e.g. disillusionment, disorientation, feeling trapped, etc.) to the "wall" experience of the "critical journey" model. And then there at the "wall," many midlifers are tempted to respond by escaping, "starting over," or just "grinning and bearing it." But God's invitation at the wall is to grow spiritually in a new way – through a profound surrendering in trust to him.

Figure 4. Slide from March 7, 2021 Sermon, Describing Typical Spiritual Dynamics of Midlife, But Incorporating Janet Hagberg and Robert Guelich's "Wall"



The third main point of the sermon explored what it looks like to surrender in trust to God at the "wall." And what 2 Corinthians 12:7-10 shows is that surrender means letting go of the world's "ladder mentality," and instead trusting in God's "circle of grace." The "ladder mentality" sees life as all about climbing to the top and being satisfied there; likewise, the most important thing to do is to avoid falling down or seeming weak. But God's "circle of grace" sees life differently. Yes, there are stages of growth, but at every stage the believer is still close to God because of his grace in Christ. Climbing higher is no longer defining, and neither is the fear of falling or being weak. This is how Paul is able to be "content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities."¹²

12. 2 Cor 12:10.

At the painful “wall” of midlife, the believer comes to realize that a “ladder mentality” to life just does not work. It only leads to disillusionment and disorientation and feeling trapped. And so there at the “wall,” the midlife believer is finally ready to let go of the rungs, and to fall into the grip of God’s all sufficient grace.

The sermon concluded by acknowledging that much more can still be said about what it looks like to “fall into the grips of God’s all sufficient grace.” And so the sermon ended with an invitation to come back for the next sermon, in which actual stories of spiritual formation at midlife will be presented.

For reflection, the sermon left people to consider these three questions: 1.) Where do you think *you* are in the six stages of Hagberg and Guelich’s “critical journey”? 2.) What do you think is your “ladder”? And 3.) when have you experienced the “wall” before? If you’re at the “wall” now, then what do think God is calling you to surrender with trust in him? The goal of these questions was to help City Liners reflect more on the “critical journey” model of spiritual growth, where they might be on it, and how they might surrender their “ladder mentality” in favor of God’s “circle of grace.”

March 14, 2021: “Spiritual Formation at Midlife: A Story of How It Happened”

The primary goal of the fourth sermon in the series was to take the key teachings from the previous three sermons and to illustrate them using actual stories of real people who had experienced spiritual formation at midlife.¹³

13. Jason Hsu, “Spiritual Formation at Midlife: A Story of How It Happened,” posted by City Line Church, March 14, 2021, video, https://citylinechurch.net/sermons_archive/a-story-of-how-it-happened. For a copy of the sermon notes, please see Appendix F.

Two stories were presented in this sermon: One was of Rose Marie Miller, who writes about her own life in her book *From Fear to Freedom*.¹⁴ And the second was of a man named Don, whose story Paul Tripp recounts in his book *Lost in the Middle*.¹⁵ The two stories were told in parallel, broken up into three parts, with each part corresponding to a key teaching from the previous three sermons. In the first part, Don's story and Rose Marie's story each helped to illustrate the inner turmoil of midlife dynamics. In the second part, their stories helped to illustrate what it's like to hit the "wall" of Hagberg and Guelich's "critical journey." And then in the third part, their stories helped to illustrate what it's like to repent of a "ladder mentality" at midlife, and to instead experience God's all sufficient grace.

This sermon concluded with an exposition of 1 Peter 1:3-9, showing how the stories of Rose Marie and Don overlap with the story of spiritual formation found in the Scriptures: God lets his people go through various trials and griefs (e.g. midlife inner turmoil) to expose the limitations and failures of sin and idolatry (e.g. the "ladder mentality" that places a person's worth in how high he or she can climb) in order to refine a person's faith (a.k.a. spiritual formation) to the praise and glory of Jesus.

The sermon then contrasted this story found in the Scriptures with the worldly story that many at midlife try to cling to: Instead of going through various trials and griefs, we want to avoid trials and griefs. Instead of seeing how our sins and idols fail us, we want them to work for us. And while we don't mind a refined faith to the praise and glory of Jesus, what we really

14. Rose Marie Miller, *From Fear to Freedom: Living as Sons and Daughters of God* (Wheaton, IL: Shaw Books, 2000).

15. Paul David Tripp, *Lost in the Middle: Midlife and the Grace of God* (Wapwallopen, PA: Shepherd Press, 2004), 159ff.

want is to climb higher, achieve our dreams, and get what we want. Surrendering to God, then, is to let go of the worldly story, and instead to abide in Scripture's story of spiritual formation. It is to even receive trials and griefs as a way in which God can refine our faith to the praise of his Son.

Figure 5. Slide from March 14, 2021 Sermon, Contrasting God's Story with the Story We Cling to

What does it look like to surrender ourselves to God with trust in him?

<u>God's Story</u>	<u>The story we cling to</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Letting us go through trials and griefs- To expose the failures of our sins and idols- To refine our faith- To the praise and glory of Jesus	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- <i>Avoiding</i> trials and griefs- Our sins and idols <i>working</i> for us- To achieve <i>our</i> dreams- To get what <i>we</i> want

For reflection, the sermon left people to consider these two sets of questions: 1.) When life gets stressful, what do you resort to in order to cope? Or when you really need something to happen, what do you resort to in order to make it happen? And then, could that be an idol? And 2.) be honest: Do you believe that the hard things of your life are actually means by which God is refining your faith? And how do you feel about that? Does it feel worth it? Does that

give you joy? Or not so much? The goal of these questions was to help City Liners reflect on the sermon themes of repenting from the world's story and trusting in God's story.

March 21, 2021: "Spiritual Formation at Midlife: Applying the Gospel"

The primary goal of the fifth and final sermon was to apply the Gospel to various aspects of midlife dynamics, and then to show that God does not provide a new or different Gospel for different stages of life, but it is the same Gospel that is always needed in every stage of life.¹⁶

In the first main point of this sermon, the Gospel was applied to various aspects of midlife dynamics – in particular, the midlife realization of mortality and limitation, the midlife experience of regret, the midlife experience of dissatisfaction, and the midlife experience of disappointment. In each case, some dimension of Gospel truth was highlighted. For example, in the case of midlife regret, the Gospel reminds us that Jesus has taken the worst consequence of a choice ever – namely, his death on a cross as the object of God's wrath – and turned it into the very means of humanity's salvation. And so the Gospel reminds us – even in the throes of deep midlife regret – that our lives cannot be ruined, nor can they be reduced to whatever bad thing happened; rather, our lives are safe in the healing hands of our great and gracious King.

The second main point of this sermon came back to Ecclesiastes chapter 12, and showed how in the final section of this Old Testament book, the narrator not only validates what Qohelet laments, but he also gives a singular prescription for those who might lament like

16. Jason Hsu, "Spiritual Formation at Midlife: Applying the Gospel," posted by City Line Church, March 21, 2021, video, https://citylinechurch.net/sermons_archive/applying-the-gospel. For a copy of the sermon notes, please see Appendix G.

Qohelet: “Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.”¹⁷ It was noted that this prescription was nothing new or innovative; it’s the same prescription that God had given to his Old Testament people over so many generations and from among all ages and stages. And so it follows that for God’s New Testament people, there is no new or different Gospel for people of different ages or stages; it is the same Gospel that we all need. But what can happen at midlife is that something of the Gospel is renewed. For example, those at midlife who have profoundly realized their mortality – for them, the Gospel hope of resurrection is perhaps now that much more meaningful.

The sermon concluded with a reminder of what the goal of spiritual formation is, which is to form God’s people more into the image of Christ. The sermon then attempted to paint a beautiful picture of what that could look like for those who journey through midlife well. Perhaps those on the other side of midlife move more slowly now because they’re older, but it could also be because they don’t have to grasp anymore or hurry around to prove themselves anymore... they know they already have the Kingdom. Or perhaps those on the other side of midlife are quieter now, but it’s not because they don’t know what to say; rather, it’s because they’re no longer anxious to say something impressive or to fill the awkward silence... they know they’re loved by Jesus. Whatever the example, the point is that these people didn’t mature in these ways by avoiding the struggles of midlife or by being spared such things; rather, it’s precisely because they went *through* the struggle... but with Jesus as their Good Shepherd, guiding them with the Gospel.

17. Eccl 12:13.

For this final sermon of the series, there were no reflection questions. Instead, there was a simple exhortation: that City Liners would continue to talk about and reflect on this topic of spiritual formation at midlife.

In sum, the overall goal of the entire sermon series was to help people become more aware of midlife dynamics (first sermon), prioritize more the importance of spiritual formation (second sermon), understand the theory for how spiritual formation can happen at midlife (third sermon), hear stories of how that theory can actually play out in real life (fourth sermon), and see how the Gospel can be ministered to those in midlife, resulting in greater Christlikeness (fifth sermon). In other words, this sermon series was designed to normalize midlife at City Line Church so that it can be experienced as a season of spiritual formation.

Phase 3: Follow-up Questionnaire and Focus Group

On March 14th, a week before the last sermon of the series, I began to announce the post-test follow-up questionnaire and focus group. This was to alert people that the questionnaire would soon be sent out, and that the focus group would soon be scheduled.

On March 21st, at the end of the final sermon, I gave additional information about the post-test follow-up questionnaire, and then emailed out the link for it to the church directory.¹⁸ Participants were given only one week to fill out the questionnaire so that their responses would reflect a more accurate memory of the sermon series and their experience of it. The

18. A copy of the follow-up questionnaire can be found in Appendix B, also as a Google Form at this link: <https://forms.gle/aUCHsg8Z9EsB2XmD6>.

third section of this chapter will say more about how this follow-up questionnaire was developed.

On March 25th, a reminder email was sent out to encourage people to complete the follow-up questionnaire. And then again on March 28th, a verbal reminder was given for the same purpose. At the end of day that Sunday, the questionnaire was closed to any further responses.

A section of questions on the follow-up questionnaire gave participants the opportunity to volunteer for the focus group. It also asked for participants' scheduling availability. After the questionnaire was closed on March 28th, I emailed the church directory once again to solicit focus group participants. This was necessary because the follow-up questionnaire was anonymous, so I did not know who was interested based on their responses to the questionnaire. But through the questionnaire, I did know people's scheduling availability, so once I heard back from those interested in the focus group, I was able to easily confirm a time to meet.

On April 5th, I sent the confirmed focus group participants an informed consent form to read and sign, and was able to collect them all before the April 25th focus group meeting. In the weeks leading up to the focus group meeting, I analyzed the data from the baseline and follow-up questionnaires, and composed focus group questions in light of that analysis. The third section of this chapter will say more about how those focus group questions were developed.

The focus group itself took place online for one hour on Sunday April 25th, and consisted of six participants.

Research Methods and Tools

The previous section described the three phases of the project in chronological order: publicity and baseline questionnaire, followed by preaching the sermon series, then the follow-up questionnaire and focus group. This third section now goes into greater detail about the research tools themselves – the two questionnaires and the focus group.

The Baseline Questionnaire

This questionnaire was administered through Google Forms.¹⁹ It began with a few introductory paragraphs to explain the purpose of the questionnaire, and to place it in the context of this thesis-project. This introduction also assured respondents that their answers to the questionnaire would be anonymous.²⁰

The first question of the questionnaire asked respondents to create their own four-digit identification number. Later, when respondents fill out the follow-up questionnaire, they would be asked to re-input the same identification number in order to link their two sets of questionnaire responses together, without sacrificing anonymity.

19. A copy of the baseline questionnaire can be found in Appendix A, also as a Google Form at this link: <https://forms.gle/vzFKdPcEz2BTWwBJA>.

20. "Questionnaires are usually sent out with a covering letter of explanation which often gets mislaid and would be best incorporated in the questionnaire.... If respondents are clear about what you are trying to find out and why, they are much more likely to respond appropriately and helpfully or, indeed, at all. There is a curious convention that if you tell respondents what you are trying to find out this will 'bias' them. It might simply make them more helpful. If you are mysterious about the purpose of the questionnaire they may be disinclined to answer or misunderstand the purpose, and so bias their answers in that way." Bill Gillham, *Developing a Questionnaire* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2008), 37–8, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/dtl/detail.action?docID=1644312>.

Question Set: Demographics

After the introductory paragraphs and after establishing an identification number, the questionnaire focused on collecting demographic information such as gender, level of education, ethnicity, and marital status.²¹

There was a demographic question regarding age that asked respondents to select their age bracket. The brackets were broken into 5 year increments between the ages of 30 and 60 only. In other words, those 29 and younger were clustered into one bracket (no 5 year increments), as were those 60 and older. These younger and older ranges were not broken up into 5 year increments because 1.) having too many age brackets to choose from would have bogged down the questionnaire; 2.) the focus of the project is on midlife, so it seemed more important to get granular data for the midlife span than for the younger or older ages; and 3.) City Line doesn't have that many adults in those age ranges, and so granular data there would have undercut anonymity.

Also, a demographic question was asked regarding caregiving responsibilities. Respondents could indicate whether they had significant and time-intensive caregiving responsibilities for others in their family (e.g. children, parents, or someone else). The purpose of this question was to collect data that might indicate whether caregiving responsibilities impact spiritual formation at midlife.

21. "Factual questions usually come first and in chronological order. They are mainly obvious but it may be that not enough thought is given to their selection or construction. They are key in the sense that they may provide a basis for dividing up the group of respondents to see if their answers are different; for example, by sex, by age group, by educational level, by income." Gillham, *Developing a Questionnaire*, 26.

Question Set: Current Understanding and Experience of Midlife Dynamics

After asking about demographics, the questionnaire then focused on respondents' current understanding and experience of midlife dynamics.

Here, respondents were first asked to give short answers to these two questions: "How would you define the term 'midlife'?" and "What do you think are some experiences that typify midlife?" These questions would be posed again in the follow-up questionnaire, potentially showing the impact that the sermon series might have on respondents' understanding of midlife. Could a sermon series on spiritual formation at midlife help City Liners understand its definition and experiences better?

Next, respondents were asked to answer a cluster of Likert scale questions: "I currently identify as someone in midlife," "I am enjoying / looking forward to my midlife years," and "I have a sense of hope about my midlife years." Each of these questions used a 5-point scale, ranging from "no, not at all (1)" to "yes, absolutely (5)." These questions would be posed again in the follow-up questionnaire, potentially showing the impact that the sermon series might have on respondents' identification with and experience of midlife.

The remaining questions within this set focused on how deeply respondents understand and even experience particular aspects of spiritual formation at midlife. There were five multiple-choice questions posed, and each question began with one of these statements:

- 1.) "Midlife – like any other stage of life such as childhood, adolescence, etc. – has its own set of challenges and opportunities for spiritual growth."
- 2.) "For many at midlife, there can be significant internal turmoil, manifesting as chronic and/or intense feelings of dissatisfaction, disappointment, regret, and/or

disillusionment, and resulting in a reconsideration of one's sense of identity and purpose."

- 3.) "God, by his Spirit, can use the trials of this internal turmoil to refine and strengthen the faith of his people. The promises of the Gospel (e.g. the joy of Christ, losing life to find life, the grace of his forgiveness, the hope of resurrection, a renewed self, and divine calling) can take on renewed meaning at this stage of life."
- 4.) "Those who journey well through midlife come out the other side with a more Christ-like character: more peace and less anxiety, more self-awareness and yet less self-concern, more acceptance of who one is and so less need to prove oneself; greater humility and wisdom and joy and love; greater service and blessing to others; and a greater awareness of God and his love, with a greater surrender and trust to his will."
- 5.) "People can make better or worse decisions during this stage of life – either joining the Holy Spirit's work of using midlife turmoil to form the believer more into the image of Christ, or grieving the Spirit by resisting his formative work."

For each of these statements, respondents were asked to select from among the following choices. These choices were deliberately organized in a progression, with "A." being the initial stage of understanding, and "D." being the deepest stage of understanding:

- A. Reading this is my first introduction to this concept
- B. I've heard this or thought of this before, but have not spent much time considering it
- C. I've spent some time thinking about this, but am still working out the implications

D. I've spent considerable time thinking about this and have integrated the implications into my thinking and life

A final sixth question was also asked: "If there's anything you'd like to add to clarify any of your answers to the questions in this section, you may do so here." This question allowed respondents to expand upon their answers beyond the multiple choice options given.

Again, the goal of these questions was to show how deeply respondents understand and even experience particular aspects of spiritual formation at midlife. These questions would be posed again in the follow-up questionnaire, potentially showing the impact that the sermon series might have on respondents' understanding of spiritual formation at midlife. In other words, if a respondent answered "B" for one of these questions in the baseline questionnaire, and then answered "C" for the same question in the follow-up questionnaire, then that suggests that the sermon series did deepen his or her understanding of spiritual formation at midlife.²²

Question Set: Your Church's Posture towards Midlife Issues

This next set of questions was meant to explore the degree to which midlife issues have become normalized in the church. Here, respondents were prompted to answer another cluster of Likert scale questions, using a 5-point scale ranging from "no, not at all (1)" to "yes, absolutely (5)":

1.) "In my church community, midlife issues are acknowledged."

22. "Try to use a variety of different types of question/answer styles. It is extremely boring, for example, to answer a series of scaled-response questions; and people stop thinking about what they are doing." Gillham, *Developing a Questionnaire*, 39.

- 2.) "In my church community, midlife issues are understood."
- 3.) "There is a place in my church community where I feel like I could share honestly about the midlife struggles that I have or will have."
- 4.) "There is a place in my church community where I feel like I could share honestly about the midlife struggles that I have or will have, and be understood."
- 5.) "In my church community, there are others who are experiencing or will experience midlife along with me."

These questions assume that *acknowledging* midlife issues is different from – and a precursor to – *understanding* midlife issues. In other words, respondents may feel that their church acknowledges midlife issues without truly understanding them. But acknowledging midlife issues is still a significant step, and so this questionnaire asked about that.

These questions also assume that there is a difference between midlife issues being acknowledged or understood in the broader church community, and there being a place in the church where individuals feel that they can share honestly about their midlife struggles. Just because there is a broader acknowledgement or understanding does not necessarily mean that the individual respondent feels safe sharing about his or her personal struggles. Likewise, feeling safe enough to share about midlife struggles does not necessarily mean that the respondent also believes the broader church acknowledges or understands midlife issues. But both are important indicators for how much respondents feel that midlife issues have become normalized in the church.

A final sixth question was also asked: "If there's anything you'd like to add to clarify any of your answers to the questions in this section, you may do so here." This question allowed respondents to expand upon their answers beyond the Likert scale options.

All six of these questions would be posed again in the follow-up questionnaire, potentially showing the impact that the sermon series might have on the degree to which respondents feel that midlife issues have become normalized in the church. Could a sermon series on spiritual formation at midlife help City Liners feel that midlife issues have become more normalized?

Question Set: Spiritual Background and Practices

This final set of questions was written to assess the respondents' level of spiritual formation.²³ The first two questions here were more demographic in nature: "Are you currently, or have you ever been, a member or regular attender of City Line Church? Yes or No?" And "from what age did you start to consistently identify yourself as a Christian?" The options for this second question were: "from before I was 12 years old," "from when I was 12-17," "from when I was 18-24," "from when I was 25-34," "from when I was 35-44," "from when I was 45-54," "from when I was 55-64," and "I do not currently identify as a Christian."

23. "This list is in a logical order. The introduction is first. The selection check ensures that no time is wasted answering questions unnecessarily. The substantive questions come next as they are the most interesting and are, after all, what the respondent has agreed to answer. The background questions come last because, although important, they can appear intrusive. Therefore, having them at the end encourages people to start the questionnaire, and once started they are more likely to complete the task." Stephen Gorard, *Quantitative Methods in Social Science Research* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2003), 99, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/dtl/detail.action?docID=436502>.

The remaining four questions used a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from “no, not at all (1)” to “yes, absolutely (5)”:

- 1.) "These days, I feel close to God."
- 2.) "These days, I have a healthy devotional life." (i.e. practices of prayer, Scripture, reflection, etc.)
- 3.) "These days, I have meaningful spiritual friendships." (i.e. fellow believers who know me and encourage me in the faith)
- 4.) "These days, I regularly make decisions out of trust and obedience to God."

These four questions assume that a person’s level of spiritual formation can be measured through his or her subjective sense of intimacy with God, as well as through his or her practices of personal devotion, of spiritual friendship, and of trust and obedience to God.

These final four questions would be posed again in the follow-up questionnaire, potentially showing the impact that the sermon series might have on a respondent’s level of spiritual formation. Could a sermon series help midlifers at City Line experience a deeper level of spiritual formation?

In sum, this pre-test questionnaire was administered prior to the sermon series to collect baseline information regarding respondents’ demographics, respondents’ current understanding and experience of midlife dynamics, respondents’ perception of their church’s posture towards midlife issues, and respondents’ spiritual background and practices. Taken altogether, this questionnaire sought to capture a snapshot that – in conjunction with the later follow-up questionnaire and focus group – would speak to the hypothesis that normalizing midlife within the church will help it become a season of spiritual formation.

The Follow-up Questionnaire

As with the baseline questionnaire, the follow-up questionnaire was also administered through Google Forms.²⁴ It began with a couple introductory paragraphs to explain the purpose of the questionnaire, and to assure respondents that their answers to this questionnaire would continue to be anonymous.

The first question of this questionnaire asked respondents to input the same four-digit identification number that they created at the start of the baseline questionnaire. Doing this enabled me to link a respondent's baseline questionnaire with his or her follow-up questionnaire, without sacrificing anonymity.²⁵ This also obviated the need to reprise the demographic questions. The follow-up questionnaire, then, could quickly move on to the more substantive topics.

Question Set: Sermon Series Evaluation

This set of questions directly asked respondents to evaluate the sermon series. The first question simply asked respondents to indicate which of the five sermons they were able to listen to. Could it be possible that those who listened to all or most of the sermons were more impacted by them than those who listened to only a few or even none of the sermons?

24. A copy of the follow-up questionnaire can be found in Appendix B, also as a Google Form at this link: <https://forms.gle/aUCHsg8Z9EsB2XmD6>.

25. "A longitudinal (repeated) survey allowing prolonged study of the lives of one group of respondents has many attractions. Data from such a study could be richer, may be more accurate and could help us to understand the process of change over time." Gorard, *Quantitative Methods in Social Science Research*, 96.

Next, respondents were asked to answer a cluster of Likert scale questions: “Did the sermon series cover topics that feel relevant to you right now?” “Did the sermon series help you identify ways that you might grow spiritually during your midlife years?” And “are you making any changes because of the sermon series to help you grow spiritually during your midlife years?” Each of these questions used a 5-point scale, ranging from “no, not at all (1)” to “yes, absolutely (5).” These questions directly ask respondents for their own reflections on how the sermon series impacted their understanding and experience of spiritual formation at midlife.

The remaining three questions in this set were short answer questions:²⁶ First, “what were some of the more memorable things you learned or realized because of the sermon series?” This question was written to see which themes of the sermon series had the most impact. Second, “what would you change about the sermon series to make it more helpful to you?” This question allowed respondents to indicate their general satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the sermon series. It also allowed respondents to suggest better content and delivery mechanisms. And the third question was, “Did anything change in you spiritually because of the sermon series? If so, what was it?” This question allowed respondents to say more about the spiritual impact of the sermon series.

This set of questions was extremely valuable as it was a direct way of hearing from respondents themselves about the impact of the sermon series, especially with regard to understanding and experiencing spiritual formation at midlife.

26. “But there are some open questions which require a more free-ranging and unpredictable response. Questions like these can be motivating for the respondent, and they enable the researcher to trawl for the unknown and the unexpected.” Gillham, *Developing a Questionnaire*, 34.

Question Set: Your Availability for a Follow-up Discussion

This set of questions was for the purpose of recruiting for and scheduling a focus group meeting. Three questions were posed: “Would you be interested in participating in the follow-up discussion?” “If yes, then what is your availability?” And “if there's anything you'd like to mention to help with scheduling, you may do so here.”

These questions were placed here – early in the follow-up questionnaire – in order to increase the likelihood of recruiting more focus group participants. If these questions were placed at the end of the questionnaire, then respondents would likely have been more fatigued by then, and thus would probably have been less willing to sign up for the focus group.

Question Set: Current Understanding and Experience of Midlife Dynamics (reprise)

This set of questions is a reprise from the baseline questionnaire, and is meant to show how the sermon series might have impacted respondents' current understanding and experience of midlife dynamics. For example, in asking again, “How would you define the term ‘midlife?’” and “What do you think are some experiences that typify midlife?”, the thought is that any significant change in response that resonates more closely with the themes of the sermon series would show that the sermon series was indeed impactful.

These Likert scale questions were also posed again: "I currently identify as someone who is in midlife." "I am enjoying / looking forward to my midlife years." And "I have a sense of hope about my midlife years." Here, comparisons between baseline and follow-up responses need to be a bit more nuanced. An effective sermon series on midlife would help listeners

better understand what it means to be in midlife, and so that could cause some respondents to identify less as midlife after hearing the five sermons, while others might identify more as midlife. Also, an effective sermon series might help listeners be more realistic about the difficulties of midlife; and so for them, listening to the five sermons would cause them to be less inclined to enjoy or look forward to their midlife years. On the other hand, an effective sermon series might help listeners see the redemptive value of the struggles of midlife, and so they would rate more highly than before that they are now looking forward to that season. The third question about “sense of hope” should help clarify things. An effective sermon series should help respondents have a greater sense of hope about midlife than before, even if they are less enjoying or looking forward to that stage of life.

The remaining questions within this set reprise the five multiple-choice questions that show how deeply respondents understand and even experience particular aspects of spiritual formation at midlife. An effective sermon series should help respondents progress into deeper understanding. For example, one of the multiple choice questions states, "Midlife – like any other stage of life such as childhood, adolescence, etc. – has its own set of challenges and opportunities for spiritual growth." If a respondent on the baseline questionnaire indicates, “A. I’ve heard this or thought of this before, but have not spent much time considering it,” and then on the follow-up questionnaire indicates “B. I've spent some time thinking about this, but am still working out the implications,” then it suggests that the sermon series did indeed help that respondent’s understand better the dynamics of spiritual formation at midlife.

Question Set: Your Church’s Posture towards Midlife Issues (reprise)

This set of questions is a reprise from the baseline questionnaire, and is meant to show the degree to which the sermon series helped normalize midlife issues in the church. These same 5-point Likert scale questions were utilized:

- 1.) "In my church community, midlife issues are acknowledged."
- 2.) "In my church community, midlife issues are understood."
- 3.) "There is a place in my church community where I feel like I could share honestly about the midlife struggles that I have or will have."
- 4.) "There is a place in my church community where I feel like I could share honestly about the midlife struggles that I have or will have, and be understood."
- 5.) "In my church community, there are others who are experiencing or will experience midlife along with me."

For each of these questions, if the follow-up response is numerically higher than the baseline response, then it suggests that the sermon series did indeed help normalize midlife in the church. In other words, it would show that the sermon series did achieve the goal of normalization if respondents felt that midlife issues were more acknowledged and understood in their church community, and if they felt more willing to share honestly about their midlife struggles and be understood... because now it's more normal! Most telling would be if respondents believe more strongly after the sermon series that there are others in their church who are experiencing or will experience midlife along with them.

Question Set: Spiritual Practices (reprise)

The two demographic questions within this question set for the baseline questionnaire (i.e. “Are you currently, or have you ever been, a member or regular attender of City Line Church? Yes or No?” And “from what age did you start to consistently identify yourself as a Christian?”) were not reprised here for the follow-up questionnaire. It is assumed that respondents’ answers to these two questions would remain unchanged from baseline to follow-up questionnaire.

The remaining questions of this question set, however, were reprised from the baseline questionnaire, and again used a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from “no, not at all (1)” to “yes, absolutely (5)”:

- 1.) "These days, I feel close to God."
- 2.) "These days, I have a healthy devotional life." (i.e. practices of prayer, Scripture, reflection, etc.)
- 3.) "These days, I have meaningful spiritual friendships." (i.e. fellow believers who know me and encourage me in the faith)
- 4.) "These days, I regularly make decisions out of trust and obedience to God."

For each of these questions, if the follow-up response is numerically higher than the baseline response, then it suggests that the sermon series might have had a positive impact on respondents’ spiritual formation.

Again, these four questions assume that a person’s level of spiritual formation can be measured through his or her subjective sense of intimacy with God, as well as through his or her practices of personal devotion, of spiritual friendship, and of trust and obedience to God.

In sum, this follow-up questionnaire – in conjunction with the baseline questionnaire – is meant to show whether and to what degree the sermon series normalized midlife in the church, as well as whether and to what degree the sermon series helped City Liners understand and experience midlife as a season of spiritual formation. If comparing the follow-up questionnaire to the baseline questionnaire shows that the sermon series did indeed normalize midlife in the church, and also did indeed enhance the understanding of and the experiencing of midlife as a season of spiritual formation, then it would support the hypothesis of this thesis-project.

The Focus Group

The focus group for this thesis-project was conducted on April 25th, about a month after the final sermon in the sermon series.²⁷ There were six participants, all of whom are members or regular attenders of City Line Church, and all of whom listened to most if not all of the five sermons.²⁸ Of these six participants, three are men and three are women; three are White and three are People of Color; one participant is in his thirties, four participants are in their forties, and the final participant is in her fifties.²⁹ The focus group was hosted online, and lasted for one hour. Five questions were asked.³⁰

27. “[Focus group discussions] can also be used for explanatory and evaluation research and can be a valuable component of mixed methods research designs.” Monique M. Hennink, *Focus Group Discussions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 15, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/dtl/detail.action?docID=1630622>.

28. “With fewer than six participants less diversity is captured in the group discussion and with greater than eight participants it becomes difficult for a moderator to manage a productive discussion.” Hennink, *Focus Group Discussions*, 37.

29. It has been argued that focus groups work best with higher group homogeneity. But “[g]roup homogeneity can also be achieved among participants who share the same intense experience (e.g., women who experienced multiple births or people with a severe illness). Sharing similar experiences often creates a strong

Question 1: Sermon Series Relevancy

The first question for the focus group was: “Did the sermon series make you identify as someone in midlife more? Why or why not?” The purpose behind this question was to assess how relevant the sermon series felt to the focus group members. Those who answer this question in the affirmative are more likely to have found the sermon series to be relevant to them.

It is granted that this question was perhaps unnecessary. For those who found the sermon series to be irrelevant would not have signed up for the focus group. But this was still a good question to begin the focus group with as it was a rather simple “warm up” question to answer.

shared identity among participants that overrides the need to create homogeneity through demographic characteristics.” Hennink, *Focus Group Discussions*, 39. The shared similar experience would be listening to the sermon series.

30. “Here you introduce topics for discussion or ask questions of the group you are researching (nursing staff in intensive care wards, learning support teachers, children in the first year of a secondary school, and so on) and, steering the discussion, note the issues that come up, any variations and the range of views and opinions that are voiced. Here your role is that of chairperson and minute-taker.” Gillham, *Developing a Questionnaire*, 20.

Question 2: Sermon Series Impact

The second question for the focus group was as follows: “It’s been more than a month since the last sermon in the series, and more than two months since the first. How has the sermon series impacted you in the longer term? There’s the short-term immediate response – the day or week after hearing a sermon. But I’m wondering if you feel like the sermon series has had a more lasting impact on you? And if so, could you describe it?”

The purpose behind this question was to get a longer term view of the impact of the sermon series. What has stuck with participants? And how might participants have changed since the final sermon in the series? The open-ended nature of this question allowed for focus group members to speak not only to how the sermon series might have shaped their *understanding* of spiritual formation at midlife, but also how the sermon series might have shaped their *experience* of spiritual formation at midlife.³¹

Questions 3 and 4: Sermon Series and Normalizing Ministry

The third question posed to the focus group was as follows: “Do you think the sermon series was enough in terms of the church’s ministry towards midlife issues? Or would you like to see the church do more? And if more, then what do you think could be the next thing for City Line to do?”

The purpose of this question was to discern whether the sermon series sufficiently normalized ministry to midlife in the church. The hypothesis of this thesis-project is that

31. “Focus group discussions are an effective diagnostic tool for evaluation research, to examine the effectiveness of a service or program.” Hennink, *Focus Group Discussions*, 22.

normalizing midlife – both in terms of awareness *and* ministry – within the church will help it become a season of spiritual formation. But while much of the questionnaire data was able to show how the sermon series helped to normalize *awareness*, the questionnaires did not do much to show whether the sermon series helped to normalize *ministry*. So this focus group question was meant to compensate for that. If focus group members felt that more needed to be done regarding the church’s ministry to midlife issues, then it suggests that more than just a sermon series is necessary to normalize the church’s ministry to those in midlife. And then the follow-up question of “what do you think could be the next thing for City Line to do?” would give some direction as to what else could help normalize the church’s ministry to those in midlife.

The fourth question was presented to take this conversation further: “If it weren’t for the pandemic, would you have wanted the sermon series content presented still as a sermon series, or in some other format? If another format, then what other format, and why?”

In many ways, this fourth question served the same purpose as the third question – to hear feedback on whether the sermon series helped to normalize the church’s ministry to those in midlife. The main difference, however, is that the third question prompted discussion on what other ministry to *add* to the sermon series, but this fourth question prompted discussion on whether the sermon series should have been *replaced*. In other words, the third question asked whether the sermon series was *sufficient* to normalize ministry, but this fourth question asked whether the sermon series was *necessary*.

Question 5: Clarifying Questionnaire Results

The final question for the focus group was for the purpose of clarifying questionnaire results. After receiving all the responses for the follow-up questionnaire, I analyzed the data and noted any results that were surprising. Realizing that there would not be enough time in the focus group to clarify *all* the surprising results, I selected what seemed to be the most *significant* surprising result.³²

The question was presented to the focus group with the following background: Not everyone who responded to the follow-up questionnaire found the sermon series to be relevant to them. About 20% found it less than relevant. What's interesting is that those who didn't find the series relevant to them also had higher ratings for their own spiritual health relative to those who did find the series relevant. Meaning, they on average rated themselves more highly as having a healthy devotional life, or having meaningful spiritual friendships, or regularly making decision out of trust and obedience to God. The same goes for the 50% or so of respondents for whom the sermon series didn't really help them understand spiritual formation at midlife more than they already did. In other words, those respondents who didn't experience much growth in their understanding also rated themselves more highly in terms of their spiritual health, relative to those who really did seem to grow in their understanding through the sermon series.

32. "The discussion is focused on a specific topic or limited number of issues, to allow sufficient time to discuss each issue in detail." Hennink, *Focus Group Discussions*, 2.

After providing this background, the question was then asked: “There is a correlation between rating yourself as more spiritually healthy and not finding the sermon series to be relevant or not learning that much from the sermon series. Why do you think this is?”

Of all the surprising results from the baseline and follow-up questionnaires, this one seemed to be the most significant since it has to do directly with the sermon series and its relationship to spiritual formation. Did the sermon series actually *diminish* spiritual health and formation? Or was it that those who were already struggling in their spiritual health and formation found the sermon series most relevant and helpful? In a focus group, this surprising result could be better understood.³³

In sum, the focus group contributed information that the questionnaires could not provide. For example, because the focus group occurred about a month after the follow-up questionnaire, it could provide more data on the longer-term impact of the sermon series. Also, while the questionnaires were not able to explore the degree to which the sermon series normalized midlife ministry, the focus groups could compensate by opening up discussion on that particular topic. And then finally, where the questionnaires provided surprising results, the focus group discussion could provide helpful explanation.

Project Limitations

The previous section described the research methods and tools that were used to gather data under the implemented project: the baseline questionnaire, the follow-up

33. “Survey findings may also reveal confusing or seemingly contradictory results. Focus group discussions may therefore be used after quantitative research to uncover contextual information and provide examples, enabling a fuller understanding of the quantitative findings.” Hennink, *Focus Group Discussions*, 22.

questionnaire, and the focus group. This fourth and final section of this chapter will now consider the limitations of the implemented project.

Perhaps one of the most significant limitations of this project is that its total duration was only five weeks from the start of the sermon series to the end, and the focus group was only one month after that. While having this shorter timeframe helped to ameliorate the problem of attrition (i.e. shorter duration reduces the likelihood that participants drop out), it also limited the capacity of this project to measure the long term impact of the program. While the *understanding* of spiritual formation at midlife can likely be immediately enhanced by a sermon series, the *experience* of spiritual formation at midlife will likely take longer to manifest and be measured.

What's more, this project assumes that a person's subjective assessment of their own spiritual formation (i.e. using the final question sets for both the baseline and follow-up questionnaires) is a reliable measure. But is it? For certainly, someone's professed answer regarding their own spiritual formation (i.e. what they think is true of themselves) and someone's functional answer (i.e. what is actually true of them, as displayed in how they function in life) can differ. Better, then, would have been for the research tools to utilize some kind of objective measurement of spiritual formation. But while such objective data would certainly have been helpful, to collect such data was beyond the scope of this project.

Another limitation of this project is the risk of participant bias. Participants in this project were all members or regular attenders of City Line Church, where I am Lead Pastor. What's more, I was the one who preached all the sermons that they were asked to evaluate. As such, their answers to the questionnaires and during the focus group may have been skewed,

especially with regard to program evaluation. In light of this, all attempts were made to ameliorate this problem: the questionnaires were administered anonymously, and the focus group questions were worded in such a way as to invite honest – and even critical – responses.

Finally, this project is limited in its representation beyond City Line Church. The research population for this project was not large enough nor diverse enough to allow explanatory power regarding differences in gender, ethnicity, economic class, etc. – though it is acknowledged that all of these factors are significant. This limits to some degree the value of this research for the broader Church.

Conclusion

The project design that was implemented for this thesis-project was a one-group pre-test/post-test quasi-experiment for program evaluation. That was true for its initial design, and continued to be true for the actually implemented design, despite some significant changes. These changes were that instead of delivering the program curriculum in a retreat format, or even in a small group format, it was delivered using a sermon series format. The research methodology, however, did not change. The implemented project would continue to use a baseline questionnaire administered prior to the sermon series being preached, a follow-up questionnaire administered after the sermon series was preached, and a focus group administered one month later.

Despite the limitations of this particular project design, the implemented project was still significantly valuable in that it not only addressed an important topic for many City Liners,

but it also produced valuable data for exploring the hypothesis of this thesis-project:

normalizing midlife within the church will help it become a season of spiritual formation.

Program delivery was centered on testing this hypothesis. Preaching a sermon series before the whole church on spiritual formation at midlife should help to normalize midlife. Since the whole church would be listening to the same material, it should help many in the church to feel more free to talk about the topic of midlife spirituality with one another. Also, by using the sermon series format, a great deal of information could be communicated in a short amount of time (as compared to a format where there is more discussion), and this should more effectively help people *understand* the dynamics of spiritual formation at midlife. Indeed, that is what the *content* of the sermons in the series was designed to do. Finally, while a typical lecture-based sermon series does not engage listeners in a broad range of spiritual formation practices, this particular sermon series did incorporate the use of “chat” discussions, corporate prayer, and reflection questions. This was all for the goal of helping City Liners *experience* spiritual formation, and especially for those in midlife.

The research methodology for the implemented project – which included a baseline questionnaire, a follow-up questionnaire, and a focus group – was designed to evaluate the program. Follow-up questionnaire responses – when compared to baseline questionnaire responses – should show whether and to what degree the sermon series normalized midlife in the church (first half of the hypothesis). They should also show whether and to what degree the sermon series helped City Liners understand and experience midlife as a season of spiritual formation (second half of the hypothesis). And then the focus group was designed not only to gather information on topics that the questionnaires did not cover, but also to help explain

some of the results of the questionnaires that were surprising. Taken altogether, these research tools should be able to evaluate the sermon series in such a way as to explore more deeply the hypothesis of this thesis-project.

The next chapter – chapter 5 – presents the outcomes of the project, and draws some conclusions for church ministry.

CHAPTER 5: PROJECT OUTCOMES AND CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

The midlife years can be a season of struggle and challenge for many people. But the God of the Bible is loving enough and powerful enough and wise enough to redeem those years for the sake of spiritual formation. Indeed, it is not despite but even through the struggles and challenges that the Holy Spirit forms the human spirit more and more into the image of Christ.

But how might churches join the work of the Spirit in ministering to those in midlife? The hypothesis of this thesis-project is that normalizing midlife – both in terms of awareness and in terms of ministry – will help it to become a season of spiritual formation.

The previous chapter described the project that was implemented to test this hypothesis. It was a one-group pre-test/post-test quasi-experiment for program evaluation. The program was a five-week sermon series (with some congregational interaction and reflection), meant not only to normalize awareness about midlife issues, but also to normalize ministry to midlife people. The research instruments used to evaluate this program consisted of a baseline questionnaire administered before the sermon series was preached, a follow-up questionnaire administered afterwards, and a focus group discussion administered at the end. The goal of these research instruments was to measure the degree to which the sermon series helped participants not only understand but also experience spiritual formation at midlife.

This fifth and final chapter will present the outcomes of the project – as revealed through the research findings – and draw some conclusions for church ministry. The first section of this chapter will describe the participants of the project – the number of responses,

their demographics, and so on. The second section will present the research findings, along with their implications on the hypothesis of this thesis-project. And the third section will conclude with some recommendations for ministry both at City Line and beyond.

Project Participants

During Lent of 2021, there were on average approximately 80 adult worshippers in attendance for City Line's worship services (all online via Zoom). All of them were invited to participate in the baseline and follow-up questionnaires, and those who completed both questionnaires were also invited to participate in the focus group discussion. What follows is an analysis of who it was that participated in the research aspects of this project – the questionnaire participants and the focus group participants.

Questionnaire Participants

Unsurprisingly, there was some attrition going from the baseline questionnaire to the follow-up questionnaire: 50 individuals completed the former, while only 39 completed the latter.¹ Ultimately, there were only 30 useable questionnaire "pairs" – meaning, only 30 individuals completed both the baseline questionnaire and the follow-up questionnaire, and provided matching identifications numbers to connect the two.²

1. There were 20 baseline questionnaires that had no matching follow-up questionnaire.

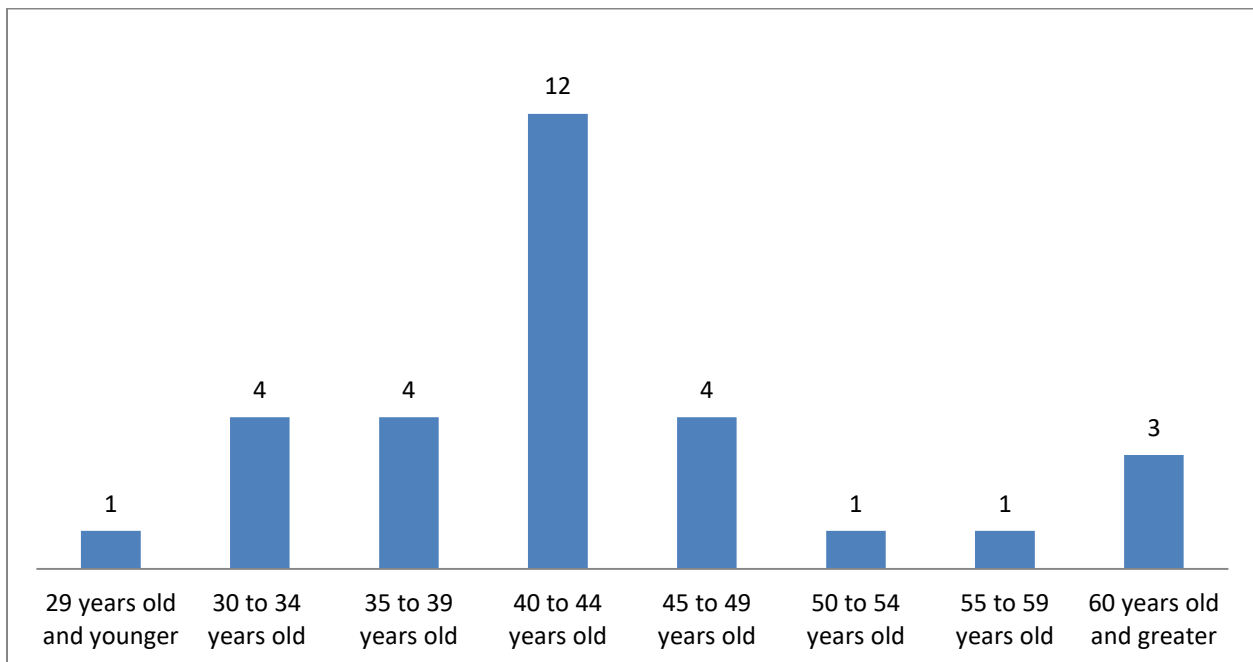
2. Of the 39 respondents to the follow-up questionnaire, six did not participate in the baseline questionnaire, and three could not remember the identification number they used for their baseline questionnaire.

The research findings of this thesis-project focus solely on these 30 useable questionnaire pairs. In other words, these 30 are considered the questionnaire participants for this thesis-project.

Age

As part of the baseline questionnaire, participants were asked to indicate their age bracket. Of the 30 questionnaire participants, twelve were in the “40 to 44 years old” bracket. That is 40% of all participants, and by far the most represented age bracket. The next most represented age brackets were “30 to 34 years old,” “35 to 39 years old,” and “45 to 49 years old,” at four participants each.

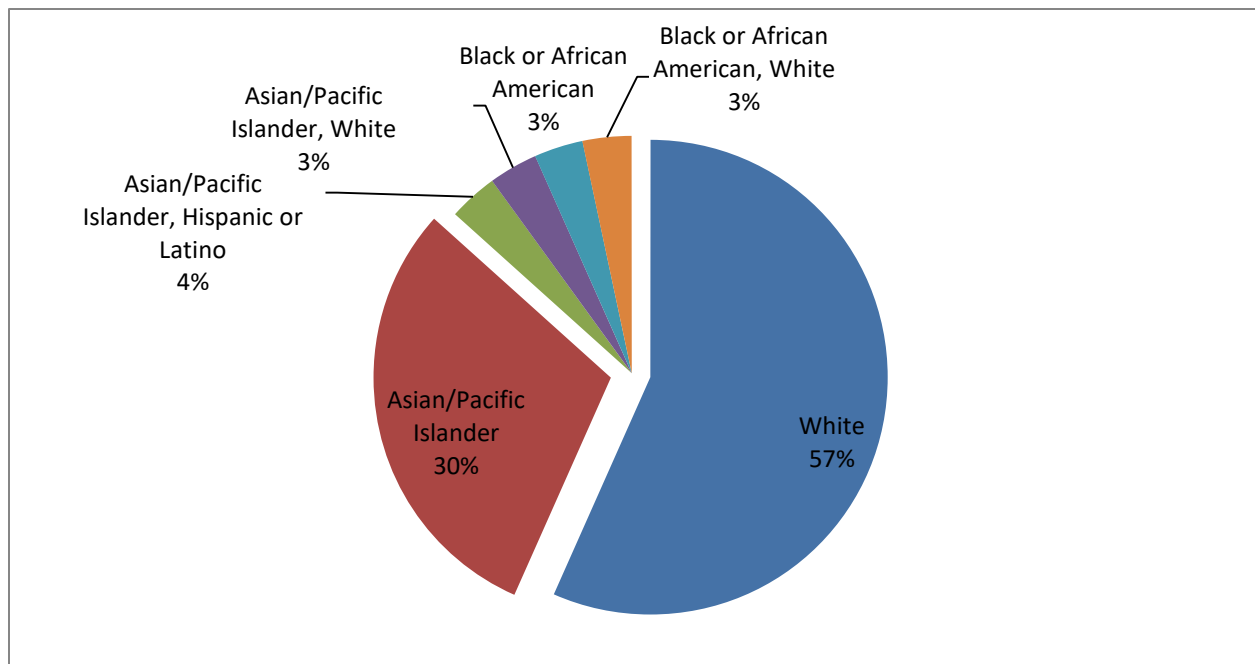
Figure 6. Chart Showing Questionnaire Participants by Age Bracket



Sex, Race, and Education

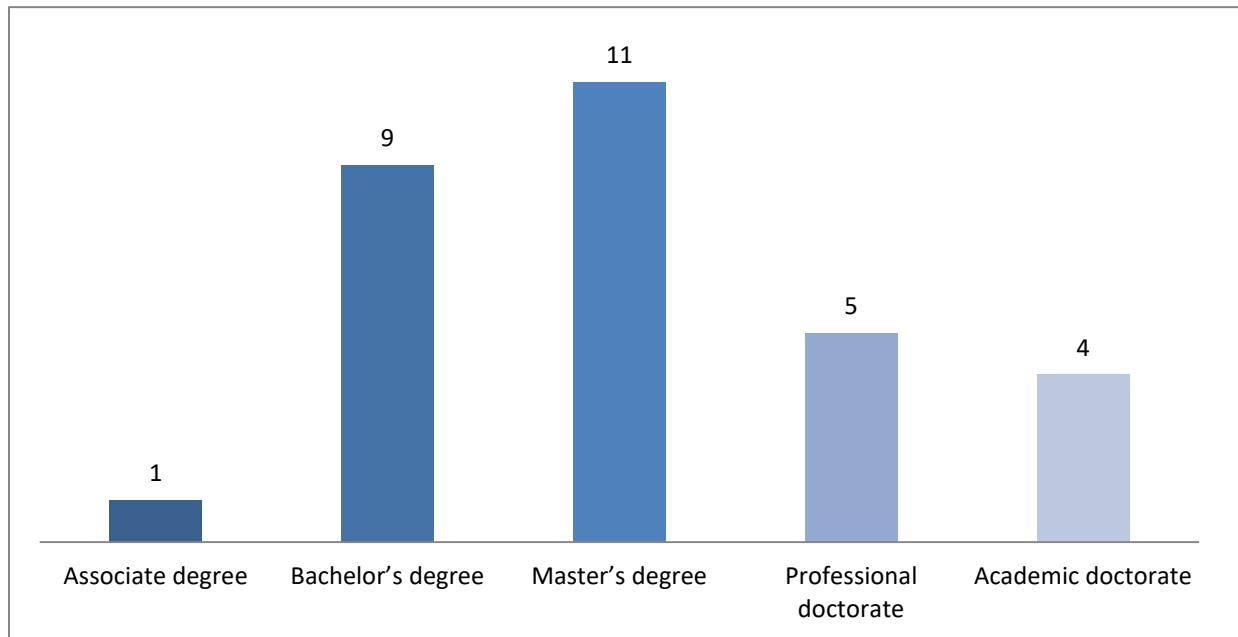
Of the 30 questionnaire participants, exactly half were male and half were female. When asked to specify their racial identity, 17 participants described themselves as “White,” while nine described themselves as “Asian/Pacific Islander.” Of the remaining four participants, one was Black or African American, and three were bi-racial (Black/White, Asian/White, Latino/Asian).

Figure 7. Chart Showing Questionnaire Participants by Racial Identity



In terms of education level, all participants had completed some kind of post-secondary degree – with about a third having earned a bachelor’s degree, a third having earned a master’s degree, and another third having earned either a professional or academic doctorate.

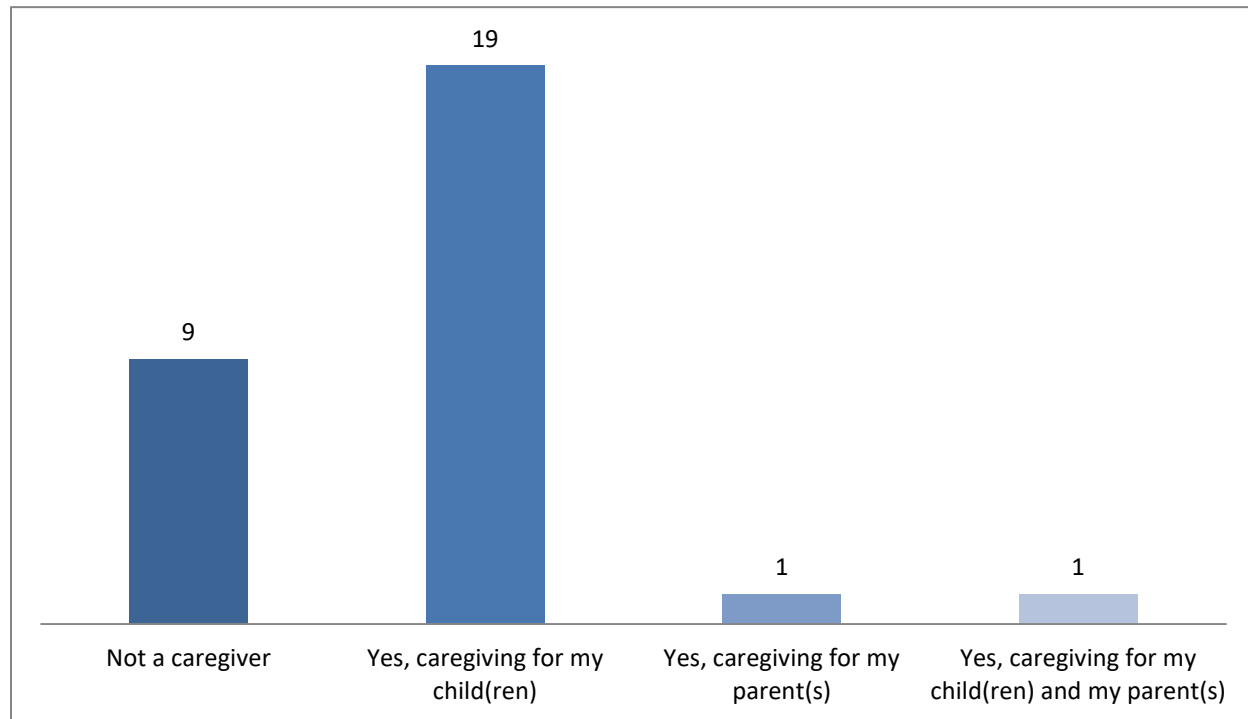
Figure 8. Chart Showing Questionnaire Participants by Education Level



Marriage and Caregiving Relationships

The bulk of questionnaire participants – 83% – were married; only five participants were single. A slightly smaller percentage of participants – 70% – were also caregivers, selecting on the questionnaire that they “currently have significant and time-intensive caregiving responsibilities” for someone in their family. Most caregiving was directed towards children (19 participants); only one participant indicated that he or she had caregiving responsibilities for parents; and one more indicated caregiving responsibilities for both parents and children.

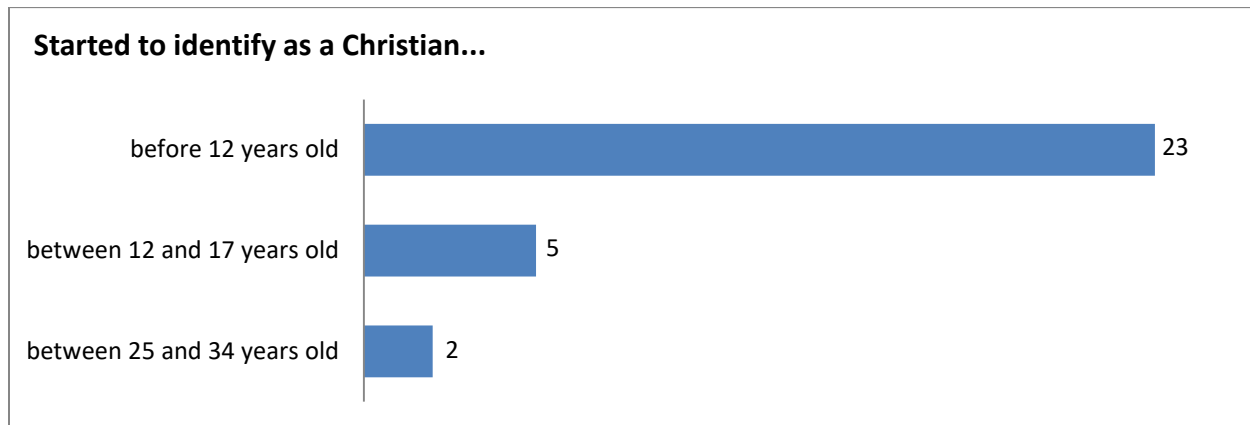
Figure 9. Chart Showing Questionnaire Participants by Caregiving Role



Church Affiliation, Faith Background, and Sermon Series Attendance

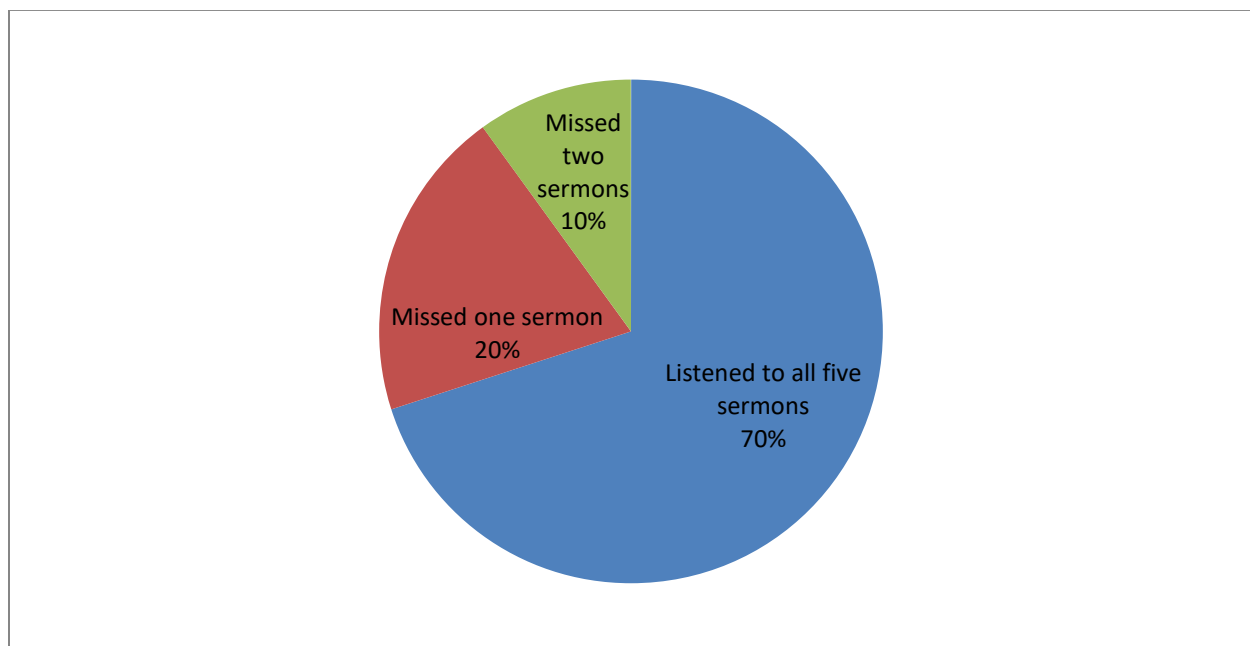
All 30 of the questionnaire participants were either members or regular attenders of City Line Church. And the large majority of them – 76% – started to consistently identify themselves as Christians from before they were 12 years old. Five participants – 17% – started to consistently identify themselves as Christians between the ages of 12 and 17. And only two participants – 7% – started between the ages of 25 and 34. None of the participants indicated that they started to consistently identify themselves as Christians between the ages of 18 and 24 years old.

Figure 10. Chart Showing Questionnaire Participants by Age They Began to Identify as Christian



Finally, the large majority of questionnaire participants – 70% – listened to all five of the sermons in the sermon series. Six participants – 20% – listened to all but one of the sermons. And the remaining three participants – 10% – missed two of the sermons.

Figure 11. Chart Showing Questionnaire Participants by How Many Sermons They Listened to



Unmatched Baseline Questionnaires

To get a better sense of who the questionnaire participants are, perhaps it would help to see who they are not. What follows is a brief analysis of the 20 unmatched baseline questionnaires, with comparison to the 30 actual questionnaire participants.³

Six respondents from among the 20 unmatched baseline questionnaires replied that they were 29 years old or younger. This is in contrast to only one questionnaire participant – who completed both a baseline questionnaire and a matching follow-up questionnaire – in the same age bracket. This suggests that many of the younger cohort – after listening to the sermon series – did not complete the follow-up questionnaire... perhaps because they felt that the sermon series was not as relevant or meaningful to them?

Of the 20 unmatched baseline questionnaires, twelve (60%) indicated female, and eight (40%) indicated male. This is in contrast to the actual questionnaire participants, who had a more balanced male-to-female ratio. In other words, a greater percentage of women than men decided to not complete the follow-up questionnaire. This raises the question of whether the sermon series connected slightly better with men than with women?

In terms of racial identity, 32 of all baseline questionnaire indicated “White,” but 15 of them did not complete a matching follow-up questionnaire. In contrast, 14 of all baseline questionnaires indicated “Asian/Pacific Islander,” but only five of them did not complete a matching follow-up questionnaire. In other words, there was greater attrition among Whites (47% did not complete the follow-up questionnaire) than among Asian/Pacific Islanders (36%

3. It is granted that this analysis must remain speculative due to the small sample size of this project. However, any findings here can still be informative for understanding the actual questionnaire participants better.

did not complete the follow-up questionnaire). There was no attrition among the other racial groups. This raises the question of whether the sermon series connected slightly better with racial minorities?

Looking at education level, 19 of all baseline questionnaires indicated “bachelor’s degree,” but ten of them (53%) did not complete a matching follow-up questionnaire. 17 of all baseline questionnaires indicated “master’s degree,” but six of them (35%) did not complete a matching follow-up questionnaire. 13 of all baseline questionnaires indicated some kind of doctorate, but only four of them (31%) did not complete a matching follow-up questionnaire. This raises the question of whether the sermon series connected slightly better with more educated people? Another possibility is that the more educated were also older, and therefore more likely to be in their midlife years, and thus saw the sermon series as more relevant and meaningful. A final possibility is that the more educated saw more value to questionnaire research, and so were more willing to participate. With all that said, the one baseline respondent who selected “associate degree” did not drop out.

Regarding marital status, eleven of all baseline questionnaires indicated “single,” and six of them (54%) did not complete a matching follow-up questionnaire. In contrast, 39 of all baseline questionnaires indicated “married,” and only 14 of them (36%) did not complete a matching follow-up questionnaire. Regarding caregiving status, 18 of all baseline questionnaire respondents were not caregivers, and nine of them (50%) did not complete a matching follow-up questionnaire. This is in contrast to the 32 baseline questionnaires that indicated some kind of caregiving responsibility, and only eleven of them (34%) not completing a matching follow-up

questionnaire. This raises the question of whether the sermon series connected slightly better with married people who have caregiving responsibilities?

In terms of church affiliation, there was not much difference between questionnaire participants and unmatched baseline questionnaire respondents. All but one of the unmatched baseline questionnaire respondents were either members or regular attenders of City Line Church.

Finally, in terms of faith background, six of the 20 unmatched baseline questionnaire respondents (30%) indicated that they had started identifying themselves as Christians at some point after turning 18 years old. This is in contrast to the mere two questionnaire participants out of 30 (7%) in the same cohort. In other words, after hearing the sermon series, many of those who became Christians at a later age chose not to complete the follow-up questionnaire. This raises the question of whether the sermon series connected slightly better with those who have been in the faith for a longer duration?

Experimenter Effects?

What the data seem to show is that those who not only completed a baseline questionnaire but also felt engaged enough to complete a follow-up questionnaire were more likely to be in their midlife years, more likely to be a man, more likely to be a racial minority, more likely to have an advanced degree, more likely to be married and in a caregiving role, and more likely to be someone who came to faith in Christ during their youth. In other words, they

were more likely to be just like the preacher of the sermon series!⁴ This suggests the presence of some form of experimenter effects.⁵

With that said, however, the 30 actual questionnaire participants are still a very appropriate population to study for this thesis-project. Since so many are in the midlife age range, data from them will more likely reflect how the sermon series impacts people who are actually in midlife. Since so many are well-educated – and thus are more vulnerable to the midlife dynamic of having “ladders” that disappoint or disillusion – they are a population that can more likely speak to whether the sermon series effectively ministers to their actual struggles.⁶ Since so many of them have such a long-standing history of faith in Christ, a sermon on midlife that centers on spiritual formation will more likely make sense to them. And since a large majority of them listened to all five of the sermons in the series, their response to the series is a good measure of its impact.

Going forward, individual questionnaire participants (“QP”) will be referred to according to their self-selected identification number (e.g. “QP #1948”).

Focus Group Participants

There were six focus group participants. Half were men and half were women. Half were White and half were racial minorities (one Latino/Asian, one Black, one Asian/Pacific Islander). Four were married, and two were single. Two had completed bachelor’s degrees,

4. With the exception of the final characteristic; I did not come to faith until my college years.

5. It could also suggest that ministry towards a particular people group tends to be more effective when it is conducted by someone who is of that same people group.

6. See chapter 1 for more discussion on these midlife dynamics.

two had completed master's degrees, and two had completed professional doctorates. All were members or regular attenders of City Line Church. Five of the six identified as being in midlife.

These six participants are an appropriate focus group population. They approximate the gender balance, racial diversity, marital status, education level, church affiliation, and age spread of the questionnaire participants. They also completed both a baseline and follow-up questionnaire, and listened to most if not all of the sermons in the sermon series. As such, they could speak to topics in a not only a representative way, but also in an informed way.

Going forward, individual focus group participants ("FGP") will be referred to according to a randomly-assigned number (e.g. "FGP #1," "FGP #2," etc.)

Project Outcomes

The previous section described who the project participants were – both in terms of the questionnaire participants and the focus group participants. This section will now explore project outcomes as revealed through the research findings involving both groups of participants. This exploration will center on the hypothesis of this thesis-project, which is that normalizing midlife – both in terms of awareness and ministry – will help it to become a season of spiritual formation.

Accordingly, this section will look at research findings to explore project outcomes as they relate to these four hypothesis-driven questions: 1.) Did the sermon series normalize midlife *awareness* for project participants? 2.) Did the sermon series normalize midlife *ministry* for project participants? 3.) Did the sermon series help project participants gain a greater

understanding of spiritual formation at midlife? And 4.) did the sermon series help project participants gain a greater *experience* of spiritual formation at midlife? Answering these four questions will help to evaluate the hypothesis of this thesis-project: does normalizing midlife in the church help it to become a season of spiritual formation?

Did the Sermon Series Normalize Midlife *Awareness*?

Both questionnaire and focus group data show that the sermon series did in fact normalize midlife awareness for project participants.

Questionnaire: “There Are Others Who Are Experiencing or Will Experience Midlife”

Both the baseline and follow-up questionnaires posed this Likert-scale question: “In my church community, there are others who are experiencing or will experience midlife along with me.” The scale went from 1 (“not at all”) to 5 (“yes, absolutely”).

For all questionnaire participants, the baseline mean for this question is 4.07 and the follow-up mean is 4.47, which is a 10% increase. This 10% increase is especially noteworthy since the baseline response was already so high. It would seem, then, that the sermon series did help strengthen the sense among City Liners that there are others who are experiencing or will experience midlife along with them. In other words, it helped to normalize the awareness of midlife as a normal stage of life, typical of people in the church.

Interestingly, regarding this same question, those questionnaire participants who were deemed to have “learned from the series” did not indicate much change after the sermon

series.⁷ Their baseline mean is 4.50, and their follow-up mean is the same. For those who did *not* “learn from the series,” however, there was a dramatic increase from a baseline mean of 3.57 to a follow-up mean of 4.43; this is a 24% increase. Similarly, those who thought the sermon series was relevant to them experienced only a modest increase from a baseline mean of 4.42 to a follow-up mean of 4.71.⁸ But those who thought the sermon series was not relevant experienced a much more significant increase from 2.67 to 3.50; this is a 31% increase.

What explains this? First, it should be noted that those who “learned from the series” and those who thought the series was relevant to them already had high baseline means – 4.50 and 4.42, respectively. There just wasn’t much room for their follow-up responses to increase! But second, these results suggest that even those who did not “learn from the series” or find the series relevant to them experienced a heightened sense that there are others in the church who are or will experience midlife along with them. In other words, simply talking about midlife from behind the pulpit helps significantly to normalize awareness about it, regardless of how helpful or relevant the sermons themselves are.

7. To determine who “learned from the series,” I compiled the baseline and follow-up responses for the five multiple-choice questions listed under the question set, “Current Understanding and Experience of Midlife Dynamics.” (Please see chapter 4 for more discussion on the framing of these questions.) Those that indicated a deeper understanding after the sermon series (e.g. went from “A” in their baseline response to “B” in their follow-up response) for at least three of the five questions, they were considered to have “learned from the series.” Those that did *not* indicate a deeper understanding for at least three of five questions, they were considered to have *not* “learned from the series.” Using this method, 16 of the 30 questionnaire participants (53%) were deemed to have “learned from the series.”

8. To determine which questionnaire participants found the sermon series to be relevant to them, I compiled the follow-up questionnaire responses to this Likert-scale question under the question set, “Sermon Series Evaluation”: “Did the sermon series cover topics that feel relevant to you right now?” The scale went from 1 (“not at all”) to 5 (“yes, absolutely”). Those that answered “4” or “5” were considered to have found the sermon series to be relevant to them. Those that answered “1” or “2” or “3” were considered to have *not* found the sermon series to be relevant to them. Using this method, 24 of the 30 questionnaire participants (80%) found the sermon series to be relevant to them.

Questionnaire: "Midlife Has Its Own Challenges and Opportunities for Spiritual Growth"

Both the baseline and follow-up questionnaires posed this multiple-choice question: "Midlife – like any other stage of life such as childhood, adolescence, etc. – has its own set of challenges and opportunities for spiritual growth." The possible responses to this question were: A. "reading this is my first introduction to this concept;" B. "I've heard this or thought of this before, but have not spent much time considering it;" C. "I've spent some time thinking about this, but am still working out the implications;" and D. "I've spent considerable time thinking about this and have integrated the implications into my thinking and life." These possible responses were deliberately organized in a progression, with "A." being the initial stage of understanding, and "D." being the deepest stage of understanding.

Of all questionnaire participants, 43% showed progression towards a deeper stage of understanding after the sermon series. This suggests that the sermon series did help a significant number of project participants become more aware that midlife – as a distinct stage of life with its own challenges and opportunities – is also a normal stage of life.

Questionnaire: "Your Church's Posture towards Midlife Issues"

Under the question set, "Your Church's Posture towards Midlife Issues," both the baseline and follow-up questionnaires posed these four Likert-scale questions: 1.) "In my church community, midlife issues are acknowledged." 2.) "There is a place in my church community where I feel like I could share honestly about the midlife struggles that I have or will have." 3.) "In my church community, midlife issues are understood." And 4.) "there is a place in my church community where I feel like I could share honestly about the midlife struggles that I

have or will have, and be understood.” The scale for all four questions went from 1 (“not at all”) to 5 (“yes, absolutely”). Below is a table that compares baseline means and follow-up means for all four questions, arranged as quadrants on a 2X2 grid.

Table 1. Change in Participants’ Perception of the Church’s Posture towards Midlife Issues

For All Participants:	“.... acknowledged.”	“.... understood.”
“In my church community, midlife issues are...”	3.77 → 4.53 (20%) <i>Baseline → Follow-up (% increase)</i> <i>mean mean</i>	3.53 → 4.20 (19%) <i>Baseline → Follow-up (% increase)</i> <i>mean mean</i>
“There is a place in my church community where I feel like I could share honestly about midlife issues and be...”	3.90 → 4.23 (9%) <i>Baseline → Follow-up (% increase)</i> <i>mean mean</i>	3.77 → 4.27 (13%) <i>Baseline → Follow-up (% increase)</i> <i>mean mean</i>

Upper row

The responses for the upper row (“in my church community, midlife issues are...”) are not surprising. When it comes to how strongly questionnaire participants felt that midlife issues are *acknowledged* in the church (upper left quadrant), the baseline mean is 3.77, and the follow-up mean is 4.53. This is a 20% increase, suggesting that the sermon series did strengthen the belief that midlife issues are acknowledged in the church.

Also, when it comes to how strongly questionnaire participants felt that midlife issues are *understood* in the church (upper right quadrant), the baseline mean is 3.53, and the follow-up mean is 4.20. This is an increase of 19%.

The baseline and follow-up means here (upper right quadrant) are both lower than their counterparts for the prompt, “in my church community, midlife issues *acknowledged*” (upper left quadrant). This is not surprising. It is more likely that people agree that something is *acknowledged* than that people agree that something is *understood*. To put it another way, it is easier for a church community to *acknowledge* something than *understand* it.

With that said, however, the 19% increase in the belief that midlife issues are *understood* is similar to the 20% increase in the belief that midlife issues are *acknowledged*. In other words, the sermon series similarly increased not only the belief that midlife issues are *acknowledged* in the church, but also that they are *understood* in the church.

None of this surprising. It is not surprising that a five-week sermon series preached to the whole church should significantly increase the belief the church acknowledges and also understands midlife issues.

Lower row

The responses in the lower row, however, *are* surprising. First of all, the baseline mean in the lower left quadrant (3.90) is higher than the baseline mean in the upper left quadrant (3.77). This means that before the sermon series was preached, participants felt more strongly that they could share honestly about their midlife struggles in the church than that midlife issues are acknowledged in the church. Also, the baseline mean in the lower right quadrant

(3.77) is higher than the baseline mean in the upper right quadrant (3.53). This means that participants felt more strongly that they could share honestly and be understood in the church than that midlife issues are understood in the church.

Second, the follow-up mean in the lower left quadrant (4.23) actually ends up being lower than the follow-up mean in the upper left quadrant (4.53). This means that after the sermon series was preached, things reversed: participants felt more strongly that midlife issues are acknowledged in the church than that they could share honestly about their midlife struggles in the church. While preaching a sermon series on midlife did greatly increase the sense that midlife issues are *acknowledged* in the church, there was not a corresponding increase in the sense that participants could share *personally* about their midlife struggles in the context of the church.

Confounding things even more, thirdly, the baseline mean in the lower left quadrant (3.90) is higher than the baseline number in the lower right quadrant (3.77), but then after the sermon series is preached, the follow-up mean in the lower left quadrant (4.23) is very similar to the follow-up number in the lower right quadrant (4.27). This means that before the series was preached, participants felt more strongly that they could share than that they could share *and be understood*. But then after the sermon series, they felt just about the same either way – that they could share, and *also* be understood. This is not the confounding part; it should not be surprising that after the sermon series, people would feel that others in the church would better understand their midlife sharing. The confounding part is that the follow-up mean in the lower right quadrant (4.27) is about the same as – and slightly higher than – the follow-up mean in the upper right quadrant (4.20). This is confounding because it does not match the

comparison between the upper and lower *left* quadrants. For the upper and lower *left* quadrants, there was a significant increase in the belief that midlife issues are *acknowledged* in the church, without a corresponding increase in the belief that participants could *share* honestly about their midlife struggles in the church. But for the upper and lower *right* quadrants, there *was* a corresponding increase. Participants ended up feeling just as strongly that the church *understands* midlife issues as the church is a place where they can share *personally* about ML struggles and be understood.

What this data seem to suggest is that while the sermon series was effective at strengthening the belief that midlife issues are *acknowledged* in the church, that belief is not determinative for whether people feel comfortable sharing *personally* with anyone in their church community. But what the sermon series *did* do was it enhanced not only the belief that midlife issues are *understood* in the church, but also the belief that personal *sharing* about midlife issues in the church will be better understood as well.

Explanation

What could explain this? The results here suggests that while a sermon series can raise *awareness* about an issue, raising awareness alone does not mean that people will feel comfortable sharing *personally* about that issue. There may be other and even more significant factors that determine comfortability with sharing (e.g. how long someone has been at the church, depth of belonging, etc.). Perhaps implementing the content of the sermon series in a different format (e.g. through a retreat, through a small group curriculum, etc.) would produce different results.

There is also another possible explanation. The results here suggest that just because someone feels more strongly that midlife issues are understood, it does not translate into feeling equally strongly that they can share about their own midlife struggles. Indeed, the belief that others in the church now understand midlife struggles better can actually make it feel riskier to share. For example, *before* the sermon series, a participant could share something like, “I’m thinking of changing jobs,” and that would be it. The sharing time would stay on the surface. But now *after* the sermon series has been preached – and now knowing that people in the church understand midlife dynamics better – there could be the concern, “If I share that I’m thinking about changing jobs, will they start probing more deeply into my midlife struggles that I’m not quite ready to share yet?”

With all this said, however, it should be noted that in all four quadrants, there was an increase from baseline mean numbers to follow-up mean numbers. While there were varying *degrees* of increase, in *all* cases the sermon series did strengthen the belief that midlife issues are both acknowledged and understood in the church, and that participants could share honestly about their midlife struggles and also be understood. In other words, the sermon series did help increase the sense among City Liners that midlife is something they can talk about with each other and understand about each other. This suggests that the sermon series did indeed help to normalize midlife awareness.

Questionnaire: “What Did You Learn or Realize Because of the Sermon Series?”

On the follow-up questionnaire, under the “Sermon Series Evaluation” question set, participants were asked this open-ended question: “What were some of the more memorable

things you learned or realized because of the sermon series?” Many of the responses echoed a similar theme. QP #0328 appreciated how the sermon series effected a “normalization of experience.”⁹ QP #7112 shared the realization that “these feelings I’ve been struggling with in the last few years are normal to this life stage.”¹⁰ QP #8618 likewise learned that midlife “is part of a process that many, if not all, go through.”¹¹ And QP #0526 seemed relieved to realize that a “lot of us are in the same boat.”¹² For multiple participants, one of the most memorable realizations from the sermon series was that the experiences of midlife are typical, to be expected... normal.

Focus Group Discussion: Normalizing Awareness

This experience of normalization was described in the focus group discussion as well. According to FGP #1, “One of the things that I got most from the series was an acknowledgement that this exists, that it’s a thing, and to be able to identify qualities that I am experiencing in midlife.”¹³ Similarly, FGP #5 noted that “the sermon series functioned to name things, to define things, to be reassuring and to set up a framework.”¹⁴ FGP #6 had the most to say about this effect of normalizing awareness:

I think maybe I knew this but I just didn’t recognize this... it’s normal to ask some of these questions. And not just that it’s normal, there are probably loads of people asking

9. Questionnaire Participant #0328, Follow-up Questionnaire, February 8, 2021.

10. Questionnaire Participant #7112, Follow-up Questionnaire, February 18, 2021.

11. Questionnaire Participant #8618, Follow-up Questionnaire, February 18, 2021.

12. Questionnaire Participant #0526, Follow-up Questionnaire, February 8, 2021.

13. Focus Group Participant #1, Focus Group Discussion, April 25, 2021.

14. Focus Group Participant #5, Focus Group Discussion, April 25, 2021.

these questions too.... And the fact that we were given language to define it just sort of said, “Not just that there are people who are, but there are also people who think about people who... are asking these questions.” So I think some of the frameworks and support you shared just made me realize that “Okay, there are people who think about it and are trying to help and support people as they go through this.”¹⁵

Another important aspect of normalizing awareness in the church is generating greater discussion on the topic. Did the sermon series open the door to more City Liners talking about spiritual formation at midlife? FGP #6 comments: “I was talking to people who are not in midlife about midlife issues after this sermon series.... So they’ve been equipped to speak into my own life because of that. So it reached them broadly, but I think everybody benefits from it. There’s a lot of value of having it as a communal experience.”¹⁶

Over and over again, the focus group discussion showed that the sermon series not only served to normalize awareness in the church about midlife issues, but also that normalizing awareness was very helpful for project participants.

So did the sermon series help to normalize awareness about midlife in the church? Based on the above project outcomes, the answer seems to be “yes.” For the research findings show that the sermon series did help strengthen the sense among City Liners that midlife is a normal stage of life. Indeed, after the sermon series, they had a stronger belief that there are others who are experiencing or will experience midlife along with them. They did not feel alone – or expect to feel alone – on their own midlife journeys. What’s more, the research findings show that simply talking about midlife from behind the pulpit can help significantly to normalize awareness about it. Indeed, after listening to the series, a significant number of

15. Focus Group Participant #6, Focus Group Discussion, April 25, 2021.

16. Focus Group Participant #6, Focus Group Discussion, April 25, 2021.

project participants grew in their awareness that midlife – as a distinct stage of life – is also a normal stage of life. And then finally, research findings show that the sermon series did help increase the sense among City Liners that midlife is something they can talk about with each other and understand about each other. All of this together suggests that the sermon series did indeed help to normalize midlife awareness.

Did the Sermon Series Normalize Midlife *Ministry*?

This second hypothesis-driven question was not extensively explored quantitatively through the questionnaires, but it was explored qualitatively through the focus group: Did the sermon series help to normalize ministry to people in midlife? Did it help to contextualize spiritual formation practices for people in midlife?

The overall feedback was that the sermon series was necessary for this, but not sufficient. Perhaps FGP #5 put it most bluntly:

My immediate reaction is to chuckle and to say, “Of course [the sermon series is] not enough!” That’s absurd, right?... If as a church we think critically and intentionally about the child ages, and we have programmatically and structurally built in ways to engage them, then why on earth do we not have that for the middle ages as well?... So it can’t just be left to a single series.¹⁷

Other focus group participants echoed this sentiment, and then began discussing possible next steps. A couple focus group participants brought up the importance of reflection and sharing in community. As FGP #6 put it: “I think people need to be equipped with the frameworks or ways of thinking about it, but I expect a lot of people would have to work through it on their own, or in partnership with each other, which may involve talking and being

17. Focus Group Participant #5, Focus Group Discussion, April 25, 2021.

asked questions about what they are saying.”¹⁸ FGP #1 agreed: “I think that people’s sharing becomes more of the content so you can have structure maybe 20-25% and then self-reflection so that people have opportunity to have well thought out ideas, and then the sharing part becomes part of the content. I think I learn a lot from people’s stories.”¹⁹

With all that said, FGP #4 was still grateful for the sermon series format: “I was thinking about what would it have looked like if it were the topic for a retreat. And that would have been nice to dive a little bit deeper, I think. But I actually... more prefer the sermon series the way it was because it gave time in between the sermons to really digest what had been said.”²⁰

In sum, based on the focus group discussion, it seems that the sermon series did *begin* to normalize ministry regarding midlife, but there is still much more to do. While the sermon series format was strong in communicating content to help participants *think* about spiritual formation at midlife, it needed to be followed up with space for people to *reflect on* and *discuss* that content in community. Further consideration of next steps will be discussed in the “Conclusions” section of this chapter.

Did the Sermon Series Promote Greater *Understanding*?

This third hypothesis-driven question was explored both quantitatively and qualitatively. And both the questionnaire data and the focus group data show that the sermon series did in fact help project participants gain a greater understanding of spiritual formation at midlife –

18. Focus Group Participant #6, Focus Group Discussion, April 25, 2021.

19. Focus Group Participant #1, Focus Group Discussion, April 25, 2021.

20. Focus Group Participant #4, Focus Group Discussion, April 25, 2021.

both in terms of the spiritual dynamics of midlife, and in terms of how one might grow spiritually during midlife.

Questionnaire: “I Enjoy and Have Hope for My Midlife Years”

For both the baseline and follow-up questionnaires, under the question set, “Current Understanding and Experience of Midlife Dynamics,” questionnaire participants were asked these two Likert-scale questions: 1.) “I am enjoying / looking forward to my midlife years.” And 2.) “I have a sense of hope about my midlife years.” The scale for both questions went from 1 (“not at all”) to 5 (“yes, absolutely”).

Regarding the first question about enjoying the midlife years, the baseline mean for all participants is 3.30 while the follow-up mean is 3.17. This is a 4% decrease. In other words, the sermon series might have slightly diminished participants’ enjoyment of their midlife years (for those who are in midlife), or slightly diminished participants’ anticipation of their midlife years (for those not yet in midlife). It should be noted, however, that 4% is a very small change.

When we focus in on participants age 40 to 49, however, there is a greater change. The baseline mean for this age cohort is 3.56, and the follow-up mean is 3.31. This is a 7% decrease, which is noteworthy when compared to the 0% decrease for all other age cohorts. This suggests that the sermon series had a greater impact on 40 to 49 year olds when it came to diminishing their enjoyment of their midlife years!

Regarding the second question about hope for the midlife years, the baseline mean for all participants is 3.47 while the follow-up mean is 3.67. This is a 6% increase. In other words,

the sermon series might have given participants a slightly greater sense of hope for their midlife years. But again, 6% is a very small change.

When we focus in on participants age 40 to 49, however, there once again is a greater change. The baseline mean for this age cohort is 3.63, and the follow-up mean is 3.94. This is a 9% increase, which is the highest increase across all age cohorts. This suggests that the sermon series had a greater impact on 40 to 49 year olds when it came to giving them hope for their midlife years!

These results make sense. It makes sense that after the sermon series, the average participant would experience less enjoyment of their midlife years, or look forward less to his or her midlife years. This is because the sermon series highlighted the struggles and challenges of midlife. But it also makes sense that after the sermon series, the average participant then had a greater sense of hope about his or her midlife years. For this too was one of the key themes of the sermon series – that God can redeem the struggles and challenges of midlife to spiritually form us into the image of Christ. And of course, it makes sense that these results are even more pronounced for the 40 to 49 year old age cohort, for they are the ones to enter the first decade or so of midlife. These results, then, suggest – even if slightly – that the sermon series did help participants understand the spiritual dynamics of midlife better.

Questionnaire: “How Would You Define and Describe Midlife?”

For both the baseline and follow-up questionnaires, under the question set, “Current Understanding and Experience of Midlife Dynamics,” questionnaire participants were asked these two open-ended questions: 1.) “How would you define the term ‘midlife’”? And 2.)

“what do you think are experiences that typify midlife?” Participants’ responses were coded to indicate whether or not their follow-up responses are substantially better than their baseline responses. A “better” follow-up response is one that differs from the baseline response *and* reflects teaching from the sermon series.²¹

Based on this coding, only about 30% of all participants (nine out of 30) gave a substantially better follow-up response to the question, “How would you define the term ‘midlife?’” When focusing in on only those participants age 40 to 49, the percentage increases to about 38% (six out of 16).

For the other question, “What do you think are experiences that typify midlife?”, about 43% of all participants (13 out of 30) gave a substantially better answer in the follow-up questionnaire. For the 40 to 49 year old age cohort, this percentage actually drops to 25% (four out of 16). This, however, may be attributable to their baseline responses already being so comprehensive that the sermon series could not substantially add to their existing knowledge.²² As people already experiencing the lived reality of midlife, they do not need a sermon series to teach them what experiences typify it!

21. For example, to answer the question “How would you define the term midlife?”, QP #1228 gave this baseline response: “40s or a point in time when someone they [sic] have attained their family or career goals and are in the midst of living through life with that family or career.” Questionnaire Participant #1228, Baseline Questionnaire, February 9, 2021. But then for the follow-up questionnaire, she wrote: “A point where you have reached some of the goals you made in early life with family and career, and you're living through those circumstances.” Questionnaire Participant #1228, Follow-up Questionnaire, March 28, 2021. While her follow-up response differed semantically from her baseline response, I considered this to *not* be a substantial change in response. In contrast, QP #1227 wrote in her baseline response: “30-50.” Questionnaire Participant #1227, Baseline Questionnaire, February 9, 2021. But then she wrote in her follow-up response: “Hitting a wall that causes inner deep reflection and often turmoil.” Questionnaire Participant #1227, Follow-up Questionnaire, March 22, 2021. I coded her response as having shown substantial change, and clearly informed by the sermon series.

22. For example, QP #1121 writes in his baseline response: “I think it can vary and often is influenced by the expectations, hopes, fears and traumas that came in the earlier decades. For many it's around the time that a more realistic view of one's life comes into focus - meaning dreams have to be evaluated with a critical eye to

Based on these results, it seems that the sermon series was only slightly helpful in enhancing participants' understanding of what midlife is and what experiences typify it. The slightness of this impact, however, may say more about the depth of participants' existing understanding than about the effectiveness of the sermon series.²³

Questionnaire: "Current Understanding and Experience of Midlife Dynamics"

Both the baseline and follow-up questionnaires – under the question set "Current Understanding and Experience of Midlife Dynamics" – posed five multiple-choice questions related to the main themes of the sermon series. These main themes all center on how spiritual formation happens at midlife. The multiple choice answers were progressively arranged such that choice "A" was the most basic understanding, and choice "D" was the most developed understanding. This means a baseline response of "A" with a follow-up response of "B" suggests that the participant gained a better understanding of that particular theme of the sermon series.

On the next page is a table that shows the percentage of all participants who gained a better understanding for each of the five questions/themes. The table also shows to what degree that understanding was enhanced. For example, a degree of 1.00 would suggest that the average participant went from a baseline "A" to a follow-up "B," or from a baseline "B" to a follow-up "C," or from a baseline "C" to a follow-up "D." A degree of 2.00 would suggest that

determine what one is going to pursue in the latter half of one's career and what one is going to grieve and let go. I think the finiteness of one's current existence becomes more salient." Questionnaire Participant #1121, Baseline Questionnaire, February 14, 2021.

23. Admittedly, there is also a certain subjectivity to the coding process.

the average participant went from a baseline "A" to a follow-up "C," or from a baseline "B" to a follow-up "D." A degree of 1.50, then, would suggest that on average half of participants went from "A" to "B" or "B" to "C" or "C" to "D," while the other half went from "A" to "C" or "B" to "D."

Table 2. Percent of All Participants Showing an Enhanced Understanding of Spiritual Formation at Midlife, with Degree of Enhancement

Questions/Themes re: Spiritual Formation at Midlife	Showing Enhanced Understanding
"Midlife – like any other stage of life such as childhood, adolescence, etc. – has its own set of challenges and opportunities for spiritual growth."	43% of all participants By 1.54 degrees
"For many at midlife, there can be significant internal turmoil, manifesting as chronic and/or intense feelings of dissatisfaction, disappointment, regret, and/or disillusionment, and resulting in a reconsideration of one's sense of identity and purpose."	50% of all participants By 1.07 degrees
"God, by his Spirit, can use the trials of this internal turmoil to refine and strengthen the faith of his people. The promises of the Gospel (e.g. the joy of Christ, losing life to find life, the grace of his forgiveness, the hope of resurrection, a renewed self, and divine calling) can take on renewed meaning at this stage of life."	40% of all participants By 1.17 degrees
"Those who journey well through midlife come out the other side with a more Christ-like character: more peace and less anxiety, more self-awareness and yet less self-concern, more acceptance of who one is and so less need to prove oneself; greater humility and wisdom and joy and love; greater service and blessing to others; and a greater awareness of God and his love, with a greater surrender and trust to his will."	53%, of all participants 1.31 degrees
"People can make better or worse decisions during this stage of life – either joining the Holy Spirit's work of using midlife turmoil to form the believer more into the image of Christ, or grieving the Spirit by resisting his formative work."	57% of all participants 1.24 degrees

The results from the questionnaires show that – depending on the specific theme in question – the sermon series helped between 40% to 57% of all participants gain a better understanding, and by an average degree of at least 1.07, all the way up to 1.54. This suggests that the sermon series did indeed help about half of all participants grow in their understanding of how spiritual formation can happen at midlife.

Questionnaire: “What Did You Learn or Realize Because of the Sermon Series?”

From a qualitative standpoint, participants were asked this open-ended question on the follow-up questionnaire: “What were some of the more memorable things you learned or realized because of the sermon series?” Most of the written responses resonated with key points that were intended to be communicated through the sermon series.

For example, one of the key points was that midlife is actually a great opportunity for spiritual formation. This seemed to sink in for QP #8429, who stated that what he learned from the sermon series was that “the conditions of life at midlife are actually great soil/opportunity for my spiritual development.”²⁴ The same could be said about QP #2204: “Discontentment and dissatisfaction at midlife are an opportunity to draw closer to God.”²⁵

Another key point from the sermon series was that God can redeem the struggles of midlife for spiritual growth. QP #0611 seemed to have internalized this idea, as one of the things she learned from the series was that “the struggles associated with midlife might actually

24. Questionnaire Participant #8429, Follow-up Questionnaire, March 28, 2021.

25. Questionnaire Participant #2204, Follow-up Questionnaire, March 28, 2021.

be designed to bring us into a deeper relationship with God.”²⁶ And the same could be said about QP #1948: “The frustrations of midlife can be a tool God might use to help with spiritual growth.”²⁷

A third key point was that the challenges of midlife often expose our idols, with the goal of turning us back to God. For QP #2510, this was something she learned from the series: “God's story lets us go through trials and grief to expose the failure of our sins and idols.”²⁸ And the same could be said for QP #7112: “It's because of how outwardly successful and how life goals have been met in this stage that God allows us to enter this discontent - so that we will run toward him.”²⁹

These open-ended qualitative responses suggest that the sermon series did help many participants gain a better understanding of how spiritual formation happens at midlife.

Focus Group Discussion: Understanding Spiritual Formation at Midlife

Data from the focus group discussion – which was conducted about a month after the follow-up questionnaire – seem to corroborate the findings from the questionnaires.

One of the findings of the questionnaires (discussed above) is that the sermon series was only slightly helpful in enhancing participants’ understanding of what midlife is and what experiences typify it. It was surmised that this may be due to the depth of participants’ existing understanding. FGP #4’s comments seem to confirm this: “I think I would have defined

26. Questionnaire Participant #0611, Follow-up Questionnaire, March 29, 2021.

27. Questionnaire Participant #1948, Follow-up Questionnaire, March 22, 2021.

28. Questionnaire Participant #2510, Follow-up Questionnaire, March 26, 2021.

29. Questionnaire Participant #7112, Follow-up Questionnaire, March 27, 2021.

myself as someone in midlife purely by the age-range before, but... I identify more strongly along with the characteristics after the definitional sermon.”³⁰ In other words, the sermon series only slightly enhanced participants’ understanding of what midlife is and what experiences typify midlife because prior to the series, they already had such a good understanding.

Another finding of the questionnaires (discussed above) is that the sermon series did help many participants grow in their understanding of key points related to spiritual formation at midlife. For focus group participants, the key point that stuck with them was that midlife is an opportunity for spiritual formation. FGP #5 notes: “This basic premise or idea that the challenges of midlife are the opportunity for spiritual growth, I think that is really sticking with me.... It’s like, ‘Oh, well maybe this is also an opportunity for God to meet and transform in a new way.’”³¹ FGP #6 concurred: “I guess on my end I would say... not to see it as a crisis or whatever scary word you want to call it, but as an opportunity.”³²

So did the sermon series help project participants gain a greater understanding of spiritual formation at midlife? Based on the above project outcomes, the answer seems to be “yes.” From the angle of participants’ subjective sense of enjoyment about midlife and hope for midlife, the research findings show that the sermon series did help participants gain a better understanding of the spiritual dynamics of midlife – the struggles and challenges, as well as God’s redemptive purposes. From the angle of exploring particular themes related to how

30. Focus Group Participant #4, Focus Group Discussion, April 25, 2021.

31. Focus Group Participant #5, Focus Group Discussion, April 25, 2021.

32. Focus Group Participant #6, Focus Group Discussion, April 25, 2021.

spiritual formation can happen at midlife, and asking multiple-choice questions to reveal participants' progress in their understanding of those themes, the research findings show that the sermon series did help a significant number of participants gain a better understanding. And from the angle of asking an open-ended question about what participants learned or realized from the sermon series, their qualitative responses show that many of the sermon series key points about how to grow spiritually during midlife were internalized. So whether from the angle of subjective feelings or multiple-choice answers or open-ended responses, in each case the research findings show that the sermon series did indeed help participants gain a better understanding of spiritual formation at midlife – both in terms of the spiritual dynamics of midlife, and in terms of how one might grow spiritually during midlife.

Did the Sermon Series Promote Greater *Experience*?

This fourth and final hypothesis-driven question was explored both quantitatively and qualitatively. Did the sermon series help project participants gain not only a greater *understanding* of spiritual formation at midlife (the previous question), but also a greater *experience* of midlife (this question)? In other words, did they experience spiritual growth through the sermon series? The results are unclear.

Questionnaire: Experiencing Spiritual Growth and Closeness to God

On the follow-up questionnaire, under the “Sermon Series Evaluation” question set, participants were asked this open-ended question: “Did anything change in you spiritually because of the sermon series? If so, what was it?” Of the 30 questionnaire participants, 17 (57%) indicated some spiritual change in themselves because of the sermon series. The table below gives examples of how that change was described.

Table 3. Sample of Responses to the Question, “Did Anything Change in You Spiritually Because of the Sermon Series? If So, What Was It?”

- “I usually think of God as having a plan for my day/week/year/next few years, but this is a reminder that He has my whole life in His hands. That awareness causes me to appreciate, with greater confidence, His faithfulness to me.”³³
- “I think I began to approach the challenges of midlife (of which I'm really only at the beginning stages of) as more of an opportunity to grow with God, rather than a fearful time where I find myself slipping away from God or facing challenges that drive me from God.”³⁴
- “I've spent more time praying over the past 5 weeks and praying more honestly.”³⁵
- “I think hope sparked in me that feeling discontent isn't necessary [sic] wrong or something I need to super actively try to change to dissipate - but something that can instead push me back to the Savior.”³⁶
- “The last sermon was the most impactful for me. Thinking about how to apply the gospel to midlife disappointments, regrets, etc. will be a valuable lens through which to view this phase of life. I know I'll return to these concepts in the years to come.”³⁷

33. Questionnaire Participant #2628, Follow-up Questionnaire, March 29, 2021.

34. Questionnaire Participant #8429, Follow-up Questionnaire, March 28, 2021.

35. Questionnaire Participant #6866, Follow-up Questionnaire, March 28, 2021.

36. Questionnaire Participant #7112, Follow-up Questionnaire, March 27, 2021.

37. Questionnaire Participant #0611, Follow-up Questionnaire, March 29, 2021.

For both the baseline and follow-up questionnaires, under the question set, “Spiritual Practices,” questionnaire participants were asked this Likert-scale question: “These days, I feel close to God.” The scale went from 1 (“not at all”) to 5 (“yes, absolutely”). For all participants, the baseline mean is 3.63, while the follow-up mean is 3.8; this is a 5% increase. But for just those participants who “learned from the series,” the baseline mean is 3.13, and the follow-up means is 3.38; this is an 8% increase.

Based on the research findings for these two questions, the sermon series seemed to show a modest impact on spiritual growth and closeness to God. Just more than half of all participants (57%) attributed some spiritual change to the sermon series. And among all participants, there was an average 5% increase in feeling close to God after the sermon series, with a slightly higher average increase of 8% for those who seemed to “learn from the series.” This is perhaps the most that can be hoped for from a five-week sermon series.

Interestingly, those who did *not* seem to “learn from the series” had a higher baseline mean of 4.21 for the Likert-scale question, “These days, I feel close to God,” compared to the average baseline mean for those who *did* seem to “learn from the series” (their baseline mean is 3.13). This differential continues with the follow-up numbers: the follow-up mean for those who did *not* “learn from the series” was 4.29, while the follow-up mean for those who *did* “learn from the series” was 3.38. Similarly, for the same Likert-scale question, those who indicated that the series was *not* so relevant to them had a higher baseline mean as well (3.83), compared to the baseline mean for those who *did* say the series was relevant (3.58). This differential continues with the follow-up numbers: the follow-up mean for those who did *not* find the series relevant was 4.00, while the follow-up mean for those who *did* find the series

relevant was 3.75. These research findings are interesting because they seem to suggest that those who did *not* “learn from the series” and those who did *not* find the series relevant felt closer to God both before and after the series than those who *did* learn from the series and those who *did* find the series relevant. Why is that? This will be considered further in a moment.

Questionnaire: Engaging in Spiritual Formation

On the follow-up questionnaire, under the “Sermon Series Evaluation” question set, participants were asked these two Likert-scale questions: 1.) “Did the sermon series help you identify ways that you might grow spiritually during your midlife years?” And 2.) “Are you making any changes because of the sermon series to help you grow spiritually during your midlife years?” The scale for both questions went from 1 (“not at all”) to 5 (“yes, absolutely”).

For all participants, the mean response for the first question is 4.13. For the second question, the mean response is 3.07. It makes sense that the mean response for the second question is lower than the mean response for the first question. Just because the sermon series helps a person to *identify* ways of growing, it doesn’t mean that the person will actually make the *changes* necessary to grow.

For both the baseline and follow-up questionnaires, under the question set, “Spiritual Practices,” participants were asked these three Likert-scale questions: 1.) “These days, I have a healthy devotional life (i.e. practices of prayer, Scripture, reflection, etc.).” 2.) “These days, I have meaningful spiritual friendships (i.e. fellow believers who know me and encourage me in

the faith)." And 3.) "These days, I regularly make decisions out of trust and obedience to God." The scale for all three questions went from 1 ("not at all") to 5 ("yes, absolutely").

Among all participants, the baseline mean for the first question ("healthy devotional life") was 3.30, and the follow-up mean was 3.47; this is a slight 5% increase. The baseline mean for the second question ("meaningful spiritual friendships") was 3.73, and the follow-up mean was 3.80; this is a negligible 2% increase... which should not be surprising since it takes most people more than five weeks to build meaningful spiritual friendships! The baseline mean for the third question ("decisions out of trust and obedience") is 3.80, and the follow-up mean was 4.00; this is a slight 5% increase.

It's hard to say based on these results whether participants engaged more in spiritual formation through the sermon series. While the mean response is 4.13 for *identifying* ways to grow spiritually, the mean response for actually making *changes* to grow spiritually was only a 3.07... pretty much right in the middle between "no, not at all," and "yes, absolutely." And then, when considering the actual impact of the sermon series on spiritual formation practices, the results are also unclear. For all participants, there is only a 2% to 5% increase in participants feeling more strongly that they have a healthy devotional life (i.e. the spiritual formation practices of prayer, Scripture, and reflection) or have meaningful spiritual friendships (i.e. the spiritual formation practice of community) or regularly make decisions out of trust and obedience to God (i.e. the spiritual formation practice of application).

Interestingly, the baseline mean and follow-up mean for participants who did *not* find the series relevant or did *not* "learn from the series" were higher than the baseline and follow-up means for those who did *find* the series relevant or who *did* "learn from the series." And

this is true across all three questions (“healthy devotional life,” “meaningful spiritual friendships,” and “decisions out of trust and obedience”).

Table 4. Those Who Did Not Find the Series Relevant or Did Not “Learn from the Series” Seem to Engage More in Spiritual Formation Practices both Before and After the Sermon Series

Did the Sermon Series Help Enhance Spiritual Formation Practice?		DID learn from series		Did NOT learn from series	DID find series relevant		Did NOT find series relevant
"These days, I have a healthy devotional life." (i.e. practices of prayer, Scripture, reflection, etc.)	<i>baseline mean</i>	2.69	<	4.00	3.29	≤	3.33
	<i>to follow-up mean (% increase)</i>	to 2.88 (7%)	<	to 4.14 (4%)	to 3.46 (5%)	≤	to 3.50 (5%)
"These days, I have meaningful spiritual friendships." (i.e. fellow believers who know me and encourage me in the faith)	<i>baseline mean</i>	3.44	<	4.07	3.58	<	4.33
	<i>to follow-up mean (% increase)</i>	to 3.63 (5%)	<	to 4.00 (-2%)	to 3.75 (5%)	<	to 4.00 (-8%)
"These days, I regularly make decisions out of trust and obedience to God."	<i>baseline mean</i>	3.44	<	4.21	3.58	<	4.00
	<i>to follow-up mean (% increase)</i>	to 3.75 (9%)	<	to 4.29 (2%)	to 3.75 (5%)	<	to 4.00 (0%)

These research findings are interesting because they seem to suggest that those who did *not* “learn from the series” and those who did *not* find the series relevant were more engaged in all categories of spiritual formation practices than those who *did* find the series relevant and those who *did* “learn from the series,” and this is the case both before *and* after the sermon series. This is similar to the research finding from above, where those who did *not* “learn from the series” and those who did *not* find the series relevant felt closer to God than those who *did* learn from the series and those who *did* find the series relevant... and again, both

before *and* after the series. Could it be that those who did *not* “learn from the series” and who did *not* find the series relevant are people who are actually spiritually healthier? Or could it be that *because* they are spiritually healthier, that is why they found the sermon series less instructive and less relevant? Perhaps the focus group discussion can help explain this.

Focus Group: Experiencing Spiritual Growth and Engaging in Spiritual Formation

A couple of the focus group participants talked about how the sermon series helped them to experience spiritual growth or engage more in spiritual formation practices. According to FGP #1:

It is difficult to consider the sermon, right. It is difficult to think through being more like Christ, allowing for the Spirit to continue to use these types of experiences. And, you know, the alternative is not helpful either. So being able to open up to God’s hope and God’s grace – and that looks different every day – is heartening. Heartening in a really tough time.³⁸

This particular individual is currently experiencing a difficult health situation, so the Gospel proclamation of hope in dark times has been especially meaningful to her. For another participant – FGP #4 – circumstances are different, but she expressed how the sermon series has helped her to engage more in spiritual formation practices:

I think for me, that over the past 2 months it’s helped me to be more mindful and to pray more specifically. I think I’m a person who benefits from a lot of reflection time. But I think that over the past 3 and a half years I haven’t really had that.... It’s just been kind of non-stop. And I feel like it’s been hard for me to make time to sit and reflect. But I think the sermon, especially having reflection questions every week, helped me to really sit down and think: what are the issues that are going on here? And how can I bring that to God?³⁹

38. Focus Group Participant #1, Focus Group Discussion, April 25, 2021.

39. Focus Group Participant #4, Focus Group Discussion, April 25, 2021.

For these two participants, at least, the sermon series did promote a greater experience of spiritual growth and engagement in spiritual formation practices.

The focus group did spend some time discussing the interesting research findings mentioned above. The question was posed to them this way: “There is a correlation between rating yourself as more spiritually healthy and not finding the sermon series to be relevant or not learning that much from the sermon series. Why do you think this is?” The participants considered several possible explanations.

One explanation has to do with how the sermon series was presented. It seemed to approach the topic of midlife from the perspective of challenge and struggle. And as such, it is no wonder that it seemed more relevant to those who are spiritually struggling. As FGP #5 put it:

I’m not that surprised that you see this correlation.... Your sermon series was essentially – I’m not trying to reduce it down in too simplistic of a way – but it was basically like, “Hey, are things tough? Are you really sad? Let’s talk about that. Are you feeling far and distant from God?” And if you’re not feeling that way, then I’m not that surprised that someone wasn’t like, “This did not seem tremendously helpful to me.”⁴⁰

This would explain the correlation between feeling spiritually healthy and not finding the series to be relevant.

Another explanation has to do with the spiritual dynamics of midlife themselves. At midlife, many people hit a spiritual “wall” with God, and this necessarily feels like distance from

40. Focus Group Participant #5, Focus Group Discussion, April 25, 2021.

God, and even feeling like the usual spiritual practices just don't "work" anymore.⁴¹ FGP #1 noted this in her explanation:

If you're not approaching the wall,... those questions are very clear: I know what I'm doing for my practice, I know I'm going to church, and I know I have good friends. Those things are very, very clear. Whereas when you are approaching the wall, when you are at the wall, when you are working on figuring out how to get off the wall, those things are not clear. Trying to figure out new ways of relating to God – including lament, including frustration and anger – are harder to kind of take to God. And so perhaps the definition of spiritual health for the person going through midlife are [sic] not identified. Because perhaps then the question is more are you seeking different ways, perhaps, to look at those issues, or to walk with God in this?⁴²

Spiritual growth at midlife may look different than spiritual growth at other stages, and so questions about "feeling close to God" or "having a healthy devotional life" and so forth may not be the best ways of measuring spiritual health for midlifers. No wonder, then, that there's a correlation between feeling spiritually "unhealthy" and finding the sermon series to be relevant or helpful.

A third explanation could be that there are those at City Line who have already gone through their own version of spiritual struggles (not necessarily related to midlife), and so have already learned the truths presented in the sermon series (e.g. God working through difficulty and redeeming struggles). This is the explanation that FGP #3 suggests:

I feel like oftentimes people who are going through trials, those are going to be the people that have grown closer to God. And so maybe they would identify as closer to God and they would have already applied many of these truths in their own life. So it didn't necessarily change their view on what they learned. They probably agreed with the truths presented, but it didn't give them much new information.⁴³

41. See chapters 2 and 4 for further discussion on midlife spiritual dynamics at the "wall."

42. Focus Group Participant #1, Focus Group Discussion, April 25, 2021.

43. Focus Group Participant #4, Focus Group Discussion, April 25, 2021.

Because these people have already experienced significant sanctification through earlier struggles, this particular sermon series was not as relevant or helpful for them. But *also* because they have already experienced significant sanctification through earlier struggles, they are now more spiritually healthy. This too would explain the correlation between feeling spiritually healthy and feeling that the sermon series was not as relevant or helpful.

There are a variety of possible explanations for this correlation. But none of them suggest that the sermon series was somehow detrimental to spiritual health. More likely, it is precisely those who *needed* to hear the sermon series – meaning, those struggling spiritually at midlife – that were most drawn to the topic of the series, and were most benefited by the series.

So did the sermon series help project participants gain a greater *experience* of spiritual formation at midlife? Again, the results are unclear. When asked, “Did anything change in you spiritually because of the sermon series?” both questionnaire participants and focus group participants indicated some marginal change. But when asked about feeling close to God, there was only an average 5% increase in feeling close to God after the sermon series. What’s more, when asked whether the sermon series helped participants identify ways to grow spiritually, the mean response was 4.13, but the mean response for actually making changes to grow spiritually was only a 3.07. Finally, after the sermon series, there is only a 2% to 5% increase in participants feeling more strongly that they have a healthy devotional life or have meaningful spiritual friendships or regularly make decisions out of trust and obedience to God. Taken

altogether, then, it is not clear that the sermon series helped participants gain a greater *experience* of spiritual formation.⁴⁴

Conclusions

The first section of this chapter described project participants, for both the questionnaires and the focus group. The second section presented project outcomes, as revealed through the research findings, and as they relate to the hypothesis (i.e. normalizing midlife in the church will help it to become a season of spiritual formation). This final section will now draw conclusions from the project, and make some recommendations for ministry both at City Line and beyond.

Partial Support for the Hypothesis

The previous section discussed these four hypothesis-driven questions: 1.) Did the sermon series normalize midlife *awareness* for project participants? 2.) Did the sermon series normalize midlife *ministry* for project participants? 3.) Did the sermon series help project participants gain a greater *understanding* of spiritual formation at midlife? And 4.) did the sermon series help project participants gain a greater *experience* of spiritual formation at midlife?

The first two questions explore the first half of the hypothesis – normalizing awareness and normalizing ministry. The second two questions explore the second half of the hypothesis

44. An important question to ask is whether it's even possible to measure significant spiritual growth in just a couple months. It certainly is possible for the Lord to produce significant spiritual change very quickly, but that kind of change does not (and probably should not) happen all the time! More likely, and most of the time, significant spiritual change happens steadily and slowly, over the span of a lifetime.

– understanding and experiencing spiritual formation. What’s more, if the first and third questions address “first steps,” then the second and fourth questions address “second steps.” In other words, the first step towards normalization is awareness, and the second step towards normalization is ministry. This is because the former lays the foundation for the latter.⁴⁵

Before church leadership can take the second step of effectively building ministries that explicitly address midlife spirituality, that church leadership must first take the first step of becoming aware of and generating awareness about midlife spirituality. Similarly, the first step towards helping midlife become a season of spiritual formation is by helping people *understand* it as such; and then the church can take the second step of helping its people *experience* it as such.⁴⁶

Table 5. Research Findings for the Four Hypothesis-Driven Questions

	“First Step”	“Second Step”
First half of the hypothesis:	1.) Did the sermon series normalize <i>awareness</i> : YES	2.) Did the sermon series normalize <i>ministry</i> : ???
Second half of the hypothesis:	3.) Did the sermon series promote <i>understanding</i> : YES	4.) Did the sermon series promote <i>experience</i> : ???

45. See chapter 1 for further discussion on this.

46. I suppose it would be possible to experience spiritual formation without consciously understanding that it is happening: “I bless the LORD who gives me counsel; in the night also my heart instructs me.” Ps 16:7. But because spiritual formation is about forming a person’s spirit – including his or her will – to experience spiritual formation normally involves conscious engagement on the part of the person. In other words, for people to truly experience spiritual formation, they must also understand that it is happening. But the same is not the case coming from the other side: one can understand how spiritual formation could happen (i.e. have the *theoretical* knowledge) without actually experiencing it (i.e. have the *experiential* knowledge). This would be akin to what Paul warns Timothy about: “having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power.” 2 Tim 3:5.

What the research findings show is that the sermon series did effectively normalize *awareness* about spiritual formation at midlife, but the sermon series only *began* to normalize *ministry* towards spiritual formation at midlife. What's more, the research findings show that the sermon series did effectively promote *understanding* about spiritual formation at midlife, but it is unclear whether the sermon series significantly helped participants *experience* spiritual formation at midlife.

Based on these findings, one has to wonder: If more had been done to normalize *ministry* towards spiritual formation at midlife (e.g. by adding small group discussions to the sermon series), then would project participants have had a stronger *experience* of spiritual formation at midlife? In other words, if the "second step" of the first half of the hypothesis had been achieved to a greater degree, then would the "second step" of the second half of the hypothesis have also been achieved to a greater degree?

With that said, however, the project outcomes do strongly suggest that normalization is the right strategy for promoting spiritual formation at midlife. When asked, "Did anything change in you spiritually because of the sermon series?", QP #1109 responded by saying, "Knowing others are experiencing the same midlife challenges and self-doubt helps me to realize that I am not alone and can use my experience to encourage others."⁴⁷ QP #2108 shared a similar sentiment: "A greater realization that I'm not alone and going through these crises. That these challenges are expected of everyone around me, so being just more aware that these are common problems people go through and that is a very healthy part of our faith

47. Questionnaire Participant #1109, Follow-up Questionnaire, March 24, 2021.

building process.”⁴⁸ And QP #1144 wrote: “Maybe just realizing that this is ‘normal’ and there is hope in spite of the strangeness of this stage of life.”⁴⁹

In addition to these quotes, the research findings presented in the previous section of this chapter also affirm this conclusion: Normalizing midlife – meaning, talking about it in the church, and even from behind the pulpit – can go a long way in helping it to become a season of spiritual formation.

And so a conclusion of this thesis-project is that there is *partial* support for the hypothesis that normalizing midlife in the church will help it to become a season of spiritual formation. The project took things in the right direction: it did normalize awareness, and it did promote greater understanding of spiritual formation at midlife. The project simply did not go far enough in normalizing ministry, and therefore it had not yet reached the point of clearly producing a greater experience of spiritual formation.

Recommendations

What follows are a few recommendations that flow out of the project outcomes and conclusions of this thesis-project. Recommendations will first be made to City Line Church, then to other small churches, then to mid-size and large churches.

48. Questionnaire Participant #2108, Follow-up Questionnaire, March 28, 2021.

49. Questionnaire Participant #1144, Follow-up Questionnaire, March 22, 2021.

For City Line Church

Having already normalized awareness about spiritual formation at midlife, and having already laid the foundation for understanding spiritual formation at midlife, a next step for City Church would be to facilitate sustained conversation on this topic.

Curriculum for this would have to be less didactic, and encourage more reflection, discussion, and prayer. Curriculum delivery could be through the existing small group structure, by periodically sending small group leaders short readings and questions to share with their groups. Curriculum delivery could also be through a kind of “support group” that meets quarterly or semi-annually for the sole purpose of discussing spiritual formation at midlife. Either of these formats would allow the church to leverage the content of the sermon series towards greater reflection, discussion, and prayer. And then perhaps in a year, another follow-up questionnaire or focus group could be administered for gauging progress in spiritual formation at midlife, and new recommendations could be made at that point.

Regardless of how these next steps are implemented, the overall goal is to do more to normalize ministry to people in midlife. In the same way that the church has ministries contextualized for children and youth, so the church should also build out more ministries that are contextualized for those in midlife.

For Other Small Churches

For other small churches (250 members or less), there is a question of whether or not a sermon series is the best way to initiate midlife ministry. In many ways, this is contingent on the demographic makeup of the church. If many in the church are in or entering their midlife

years, then probably a sermon series would be worthwhile and effective. But if hardly any in the church are entering or in midlife, then likely a sermon series would not be worthwhile or effective.

With that said, however, if there is *any* number of midlifers in the church – even just a few – it would still be beneficial to have some form of “pulpit awareness.” For example, in the same way that sermon illustrations are sometimes set in college (e.g. “when I was in college...”) or in childhood (e.g. “I remember when I was in middle school...”), so some illustrations could be set in midlife (e.g. “I was reflecting on being a midlife man, and realized...”). This would not only communicate that midlife is a normal and distinct life stage, but telling a midlife-based story with a scriptural point would also provide some narrative or framework for how to think about midlife. In implementing “pulpit awareness,” however, upfront speakers would need to be careful to not let their speech devolve into jokes about midlife or making light of midlife struggles. Such speech would only make things worse by heaping on more shame and confusion on the topic, making it even more difficult for midlife individuals to engage their struggles honestly, in community, and with hope.

The small group or “support group” recommendations mentioned above for City Line could also be appropriate for other small churches. And in the case where there are only a few midlifers in the church, the “support group” approach would be even more valuable, as those few midlifers would already feel like a minority, so being in a “support group” with others in their life stage would be extra meaningful and supportive for them.

For Mid-size to Large Churches

For mid-size to large churches (membership greater than 250), whether or not to preach an entire sermon series about midlife is also contingent upon the demographic makeup of the church. And the recommendations above regarding “pulpit awareness” and sermon illustrations also apply.

But for mid-size to large churches, a sermon series may not be necessary. For in these larger churches, there are likely enough people in midlife to be able to build a comprehensive set of ministries for them. Indeed, if a church is large enough, and if the demographic makeup of the church allows for it, then the overall structure of church ministries could be built around age cohorts.⁵⁰ In this case, awareness about midlife (and other stages of life) is maximally normalized, for even the way the church talks about its ministries is described according to life stages (e.g. “young adults fellowship,” “empty nester’s Sunday School,” etc.). Such a structure would also allow for maximal normalization of ministry, since the people of the church would already be organized in life-stage-based cohorts. In such a case, small group curricula or adult education topics or prayer groups could be easily contextualized for those in midlife. Again, the larger size of the church would allow for such a structure.

There is one caution about this, however. The Church is meant to be intergenerational.⁵¹ So if a church were to structure its ministries to be life-stage-based, then it would also need to overlay that with an intergenerational structure. A way to do this might be

50. See the website for Independent Presbyterian Church: <https://www.ipcmemphis.org/>. Their “Communities” are divided up according to age groupings: young adults, middle adults, and mature adults. “Communities,” Independent Presbyterian Church, accessed June 10, 2021, <https://www.ipcmemphis.org/>.

51. Indeed, when Paul writes in his epistles and directly addresses not just parents but also children, and not just older adults but also younger adults, he is assuming that the church is intergenerational. See Eph 6:1ff, Col 3:20ff, Titus 2:2ff.

to foster cross-generational mentorship, where older believers in the church would invest in and spend time with younger believers. Another way to do this might be to create opportunities for multi-generational service, such as music ministry or mercy ministry or service projects. Or more broadly, if a mid-size to large church has both a community-building ministry (e.g. small groups) and an adult-education ministry (e.g. Sunday school), then one of those could be life-stage-based while the other could be intergenerational.

The Overall Goal

Whether a church is small, mid-size, or large, in order to foster spiritual formation for those in midlife, the church must work towards normalizing awareness about midlife and normalizing ministry towards midlife.

This does not mean that pastors everywhere need to start preaching sermon series about midlife. What it does mean, however, is that somehow “midlife” needs to become part of church-wide language, on par with “youth” or “college” or “marriage” or “parenting” or “retirement.” This could be achieved through a sermon series; it could also be achieved through periodic sermon illustrations or church-wide newsletters or well-framed announcements about a midlife book club. The point is to normalize awareness about midlife in the church.

But in addition to generating church-wide awareness about midlife, churches also need to create sustained ministries that focus specifically on midlife spiritual formation. How robust this ministry is will depend on the size and demographics of the church. But any effective midlife ministry will incorporate those same spiritual formation practices that are normal to

other life-stage-based ministries – namely, teaching from Scripture, prayer, reflection, application, and community.

In the end, what churches have to do is they have to do more than simply stock a few books about midlife in the church library, or simply send people to counseling if they are struggling with midlife issues. For none of these approaches normalize midlife. While they may help individuals address their midlife struggles, they do not help individuals overcome the shame or stigma or isolation that can be associated with midlife struggles. And overcoming such things is necessary if the church is going to be a place where midlifers can start talking with one another, and start understanding their experiences better, and start seeing how their stage of life can actually be a normal part of life-long spiritual formation in the hands of a gracious God.

Certainly that was my experience as I worked on this thesis-project. I learned a great deal through the many books and journals that I read. And in this way, I became very aware of the dynamics of midlife. But I also had abundant opportunities to share with peers and mentors and people in my church the things I was learning. They would ask about my research, and in the course of the conversation, I would begin to process my *own* experiences of midlife with them. Inadvertently, I had become my own test group! Through reading and research and these many conversations, awareness about the midlife experience as well as being ministered to in my midlife experience had become quite normalized for me!

And now I am noticing in myself a greater surrender in faith. Some of the deep midlife disappointments that I had been wrestling with are certainly still there, but they are no longer as raw. And if anything, they are reminders that I need Jesus to be my glory and the lifter of my

head. I still have a tendency to want to control my life and my future, but I am now quicker to remind myself that my Father in heaven is good and I can trust him. And if anything, uncertainty is a storm in the midst of which I can find the calm of Christ. Finally, I have come to realize that this is all the work of the Spirit, at work within me forming my spirit. And he's been doing this work not in *spite* of my midlife struggles, but *through* them – refining my faith through the trials to make me more like Jesus.

All this to say, spiritual formation at midlife is not only something I have researched and written about, it is also something I have experienced. And I believe that as awareness about midlife and ministry towards midlife becomes more normalized in churches, then more of God's people will experience that same spiritual formation as well.

APPENDIX A: PRE-TEST BASELINE QUESTIONNAIRE

Hi friend,

As part of my Doctor of Ministry program at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, I am conducting a research project that consists of preaching a sermon series, and then measuring the impact of that sermon series through the use of a baseline questionnaire at the start and a follow-up questionnaire at the end.

This is the baseline questionnaire, designed to explore your current understanding and experience of midlife dynamics, as well as your perception of our church's posture towards midlife issues. The title of the upcoming sermon series is "Spiritual Formation at Midlife," and I will be preaching it through most of the Sundays in Lent, beginning February 21st.

Both this questionnaire and the follow-up questionnaire are anonymous, with only a numerical code that you select to link the two. So please do respond freely and honestly!

This questionnaire should take about 15 minutes to complete. Thanks in advance for your responses!

Jason

I. Please create for yourself a four-digit identification number that you will use later to match your second questionnaire to this questionnaire. It is recommended that you use a four-digit number that you will easily remember (e.g. last four digits of your phone number, social security card, etc.). You may also want to email the identification number to yourself for easy reference in the future. _____

II. Demographic Questions

a. Please select your age bracket

- ☐ 29 years old and younger
- ☐ 30-34 years old
- ☐ 35-39 years old
- ☐ 40-44 years old
- ☐ 45-49 years old
- ☐ 50-54 years old
- ☐ 55-59 years old
- ☐ 60 years old and greater

b. Are you male or female?

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female

c. What is the highest educational degree or level of school you have completed?

- ☐ High school or equivalent
- ☐ Trade/technical/vocational training
- ☐ Associate degree
- ☐ Bachelor's degree
- ☐ Master's degree
- ☐ Professional doctorate
- ☐ Academic doctorate

d. Ethnicity: please specify your ethnicity (check all that apply)

- ☐ Asian/Pacific Islander
- ☐ Black or African American
- ☐ Hispanic or Latino
- ☐ Native American or American Indian
- ☐ White
- ☐ Other

e. Marital status: what is your current marital status?

- ☐ Single
- ☐ Married

f. Do you currently have significant and time-intensive caregiving responsibilities for someone in your family? And if so, to whom? (check all that apply)

- ☐ No
- ☐ Yes, for my child(ren)
- ☐ Yes, for my parent(s)
- ☐ Yes, for someone else

III. Current Understanding and Experience of Midlife Dynamics

a. Please provide a short answer for each question below:

i. How would you define the term “midlife”? _____

ii. What do you think are some experiences that typify midlife? _____

b. Please select one number on the scale for each question below:

i. “I currently identify as someone who is in midlife”

no, not at all 1 2 3 4 5 yes, absolutely

ii. “I am enjoying / looking forward to my midlife years”

no, not at all 1 2 3 4 5 yes, absolutely

iii. “I have a sense of hope about my midlife years”

no, not at all 1 2 3 4 5 yes, absolutely

c. Multiple choice questions:

i. “Midlife – like any other stage of life such as childhood, adolescence, etc. – has its own unique challenges and opportunities for spiritual growth.”

☐ Reading this is my first introduction to this concept

☐ I’ve heard this or thought of this before, but have not spent much time considering it

☐ I’ve spent some time thinking about this, but am still working out the implications

☐ I’ve spent considerable time thinking about this and have integrated the implications into my thinking and life

- ii. "For many at midlife, there can be significant internal turmoil, manifesting as chronic and/or intense feelings of dissatisfaction, disappointment, regret, and/or disillusionment, and resulting in a reconsideration of one's sense of identity and purpose."
 - ☐ Reading this is my first introduction to this concept
 - ☐ I've heard this or thought of this before, but have not spent much time considering it
 - ☐ I've spent some time thinking about this, but am still working out the implications
 - ☐ I've spent considerable time thinking about this and have integrated the implications into my thinking and life
- iii. "God, by his Spirit, can use the trials of this internal turmoil to refine and strengthen the faith of his people. The promises of the Gospel (e.g. the joy of Christ, losing life to find life, the grace of his forgiveness, the hope of resurrection, a renewed self, and divine calling) can take on renewed meaning at this stage of life."
 - ☐ Reading this is my first introduction to this concept
 - ☐ I've heard this or thought of this before, but have not spent much time considering it
 - ☐ I've spent some time thinking about this, but am still working out the implications
 - ☐ I've spent considerable time thinking about this and have integrated the implications into my thinking and life
- iv. "Those who journey well through midlife come out the other side with a more Christ-like character: more peace and less anxiety, more self-awareness and yet less self-concern, more acceptance of who one is and so less need to prove oneself; greater humility and wisdom and joy and love; greater service and blessing to others; and a greater awareness of God and his love, with a greater surrender and trust to his will."
 - ☐ Reading this is my first introduction to this concept
 - ☐ I've heard this or thought of this before, but have not spent much time considering it
 - ☐ I've spent some time thinking about this, but am still working out the implications
 - ☐ I've spent considerable time thinking about this and have integrated the implications into my thinking and life

- v. "People can make better or worse decisions during this stage of life – either joining the Holy Spirit's work of using midlife turmoil to form the believer more into the image of Christ, or grieving the Spirit by resisting his formative work."

- ☐ Reading this is my first introduction to this concept
- ☐ I've heard this or thought of this before, but have not spent much time considering it
- ☐ I've spent some time thinking about this, but am still working out the implications
- ☐ I've spent considerable time thinking about this and have integrated the implications into my thinking and life

- d. If there's anything you'd like to add to clarify any of your answers to the questions in this section, you may do so here: _____
-

IV. Your Church's Posture towards Midlife Issues

- a. Please select one number on the scale for each question below:

- i. "In my church community, midlife issues are acknowledged."

no, not at all 1 2 3 4 5 yes, absolutely

- ii. "In my church community, midlife issues are understood."

no, not at all 1 2 3 4 5 yes, absolutely

- iii. "There is a place in my church community where I feel like I could share honestly about the midlife struggles that I have or will have."

no, not at all 1 2 3 4 5 yes, absolutely

- iv. "There is a place in my church community where I feel like I could share honestly about the midlife struggles that I have or will have, and be understood."

no, not at all 1 2 3 4 5 yes, absolutely

- v. "In my church community, there are others who are experiencing or will experience midlife along with me."

no, not at all 1 2 3 4 5 yes, absolutely

- b. If there's anything you'd like to add to clarify any of your answers to the questions in this section, you may do so here: _____
-

V. Spiritual Background and Practices

- a. Are you currently, or have you ever been, a member or regular attender of City Line Church?

- ☐ Yes
☐ No

- b. From what age did you start to consistently identify yourself as a Christian?

- ☐ From before I was 12 years old
☐ From when I was 12-17 years old
☐ From when I was 18-24 years old
☐ From when I was 25-34 years old
☐ From when I was 35-44 years old
☐ From when I was 45-54 years old
☐ From when I was 55-64 years old
☐ I do not currently identify as a Christian

- c. Please select one number on the scale for each question below:

- i. "These days, I feel close to God."

no, not at all 1 2 3 4 5 yes, absolutely

- ii. "These days, I have a healthy devotional life (i.e. practices of prayer, Scripture, reflection, etc.)"

no, not at all 1 2 3 4 5 yes, absolutely

- iii. "These days, I have meaningful spiritual friendships (i.e. fellow believers who know me and encourage me in the faith)"

no, not at all 1 2 3 4 5 yes, absolutely

- iv. "These days, I regularly make decisions out of trust and obedience to God."

no, not at all 1 2 3 4 5 yes, absolutely

VI. Thank you! Your responses have been recorded. The follow-up questionnaire will be administered at the conclusion of the upcoming sermon series. - Jason

APPENDIX B: POST-TEST FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONNAIRE

Hi friend,

Thank you for listening to my sermon series on “Spiritual Formation at Midlife.” This is the follow-up questionnaire, designed to measure the impact of the sermon series by comparing your responses here to your responses from the baseline questionnaire.

As with the baseline, this questionnaire is also anonymous, and it should take about 20 minutes to complete. Thanks in advance for your responses, and for helping me with my Doctor of Ministry project!

Jason

- I. **Please input the four-digit identification number that you created** at the start of the baseline questionnaire administered last month. This will allow me to match your responses for both questionnaires. Your four-digit identification number could be the last four digits of your phone number, social security card, etc. You may have emailed it to yourself. If you did not complete the baseline questionnaire, then type in "N/A." ____

II. Sermon Series Evaluation

- a. Which of the five sermons were you able to listen to? (please check all that apply)

- ☐ (Feb 21) Spiritual Formation at Midlife: the opportunity before us
- ☐ (Feb 28) Spiritual Formation at Midlife: why it's important
- ☐ (Mar 7) Spiritual Formation at Midlife: a model for how it happens
- ☐ (Mar 14) Spiritual Formation at Midlife: a story of how it happened
- ☐ (Mar 21) Spiritual Formation at Midlife: applying the Gospel

- b. Please select one number on the scale for each question below:

- i. Did the sermon series cover topics that feel relevant to you right now?

no, not at all 1 2 3 4 5 yes, absolutely

- ii. Did the sermon series help you identify ways that you might grow spiritually during your midlife years?

no, not at all 1 2 3 4 5 yes, absolutely

- iii. Are you making any changes because of the sermon series to help you grow spiritually during your midlife years?

no, not at all 1 2 3 4 5 yes, absolutely

c. Please provide a short answer for each question below:

- i. What were some of the more memorable things you learned or realized because of the sermon series? _____

- ii. What would you change about the sermon series to make it more helpful to you? _____

- iii. Did anything change in you spiritually because of the sermon series? If so, what was it? _____

III. Your Availability for a Follow-up Discussion

The final step in my research is to conduct a follow-up discussion (aka a focus group) to dig deeper into the topic of midlife and spiritual formation within the church. This discussion will go no longer than one hour, and will take place over Zoom within the next few weeks. The goal is to have 6-10 people participate.

Before continuing with the rest of the questionnaire, please let me know if you'd like to participate; and if so, what your availability is. Thank you!

- a. Would you be interested in participating in the follow-up discussion?

- ☐ Yes, I'd be happy to
☐ Maybe, please follow up with me
☐ No, thank you

- b. If yes, then what is your availability? (please check all that apply)

- ☐ A Sunday at 1:30 PM (Eastern)
☐ A Sunday at 3:00 PM (Eastern)
☐ A Sunday at 8:30 PM (Eastern)
☐ A Tuesday at 8:30 PM (Eastern)
☐ A Thursday at 8:30 PM (Eastern)
☐ A Saturday at 7 AM (Eastern)

- c. If there's anything you'd like to mention to help with scheduling, you may do so here: _____

Thank you for your response(s) about the follow-up discussion. The rest of the questionnaire continues from this point.

IV. Current Understanding and Experience of Midlife Dynamics

- a. Please provide a short answer for each question below:

- i. How would you define the term "midlife"? _____

- ii. What do you think are some experiences that typify midlife? _____

- b. Please select one number on the scale for each question below:

- i. "I currently identify as someone who is in midlife"

no, not at all 1 2 3 4 5 yes, absolutely

- ii. "I am enjoying / looking forward to my midlife years"

no, not at all 1 2 3 4 5 yes, absolutely

- iii. "I have a sense of hope about my midlife years"

no, not at all 1 2 3 4 5 yes, absolutely

- c. Multiple choice questions:

- i. "Midlife – like any other stage of life such as childhood, adolescence, etc. – has its own unique challenges and opportunities for spiritual growth."

- ☐ Reading this is my first introduction to this concept
- ☐ I've heard this or thought of this before, but have not spent much time considering it
- ☐ I've spent some time thinking about this, but am still working out the implications
- ☐ I've spent considerable time thinking about this and have integrated the implications into my thinking and life

- ii. "For many at midlife, there can be significant internal turmoil, manifesting as chronic and/or intense feelings of dissatisfaction, disappointment, regret, and/or disillusionment, and resulting in a reconsideration of one's sense of identity and purpose."

- ☐ Reading this is my first introduction to this concept
- ☐ I've heard this or thought of this before, but have not spent much time considering it
- ☐ I've spent some time thinking about this, but am still working out the implications
- ☐ I've spent considerable time thinking about this and have integrated the implications into my thinking and life

- iii. "God, by his Spirit, can use the trials of this internal turmoil to refine and strengthen the faith of his people. The promises of the Gospel (e.g. the joy of Christ, losing life to find life, the grace of his forgiveness, the hope of resurrection, a renewed self, and divine calling) can take on renewed meaning at this stage of life."

- ☐ Reading this is my first introduction to this concept
- ☐ I've heard this or thought of this before, but have not spent much time considering it
- ☐ I've spent some time thinking about this, but am still working out the implications
- ☐ I've spent considerable time thinking about this and have integrated the implications into my thinking and life

- iv. "Those who journey well through midlife come out the other side with a more Christ-like character: more peace and less anxiety, more self-awareness and yet less self-concern, more acceptance of who one is and so less need to prove oneself; greater humility and wisdom and joy and love; greater service and blessing to others; and a greater awareness of God and his love, with a greater surrender and trust to his will."

- ☐ Reading this is my first introduction to this concept
- ☐ I've heard this or thought of this before, but have not spent much time considering it
- ☐ I've spent some time thinking about this, but am still working out the implications
- ☐ I've spent considerable time thinking about this and have integrated the implications into my thinking and life

- v. "People can make better or worse decisions during this stage of life – either joining the Holy Spirit's work of using midlife turmoil to form the believer more into the image of Christ, or grieving the Spirit by resisting his formative work."

- ☐ Reading this is my first introduction to this concept
- ☐ I've heard this or thought of this before, but have not spent much time considering it
- ☐ I've spent some time thinking about this, but am still working out the implications
- ☐ I've spent considerable time thinking about this and have integrated the implications into my thinking and life

- d. If there's anything you'd like to add to clarify any of your answers to the questions in this section, you may do so here: _____
-

V. Your Church's Posture towards Midlife Issues

- a. Please select one number on the scale for each question below:

- i. "In my church community, midlife issues are acknowledged."

no, not at all 1 2 3 4 5 yes, absolutely

- ii. "In my church community, midlife issues are understood."

no, not at all 1 2 3 4 5 yes, absolutely

- iii. "There is a place in my church community where I feel like I could share honestly about the midlife struggles that I have or will have."

no, not at all 1 2 3 4 5 yes, absolutely

- iv. "There is a place in my church community where I feel like I could share honestly about the midlife struggles that I have or will have, and be understood."

no, not at all 1 2 3 4 5 yes, absolutely

- v. "In my church community, there are others who are experiencing or will experience midlife along with me."

no, not at all 1 2 3 4 5 yes, absolutely

- b. If there's anything you'd like to add to clarify any of your answers to the questions in this section, you may do so here: _____
- _____

VI. Spiritual Practices

Please select one number on the scale for each question below:

- a. "These days, I feel close to God."

no, not at all 1 2 3 4 5 yes, absolutely

- b. "These days, I have a healthy devotional life (i.e. practices of prayer, Scripture, reflection, etc.)"

no, not at all 1 2 3 4 5 yes, absolutely

- c. "These days, I have meaningful spiritual friendships (i.e. fellow believers who know me and encourage me in the faith)"

no, not at all 1 2 3 4 5 yes, absolutely

- d. "These days, I regularly make decisions out of trust and obedience to God."

no, not at all 1 2 3 4 5 yes, absolutely

- VII. Your responses have been recorded.** Thank you so much for all of your help with my Doctor of Ministry project. Would God use it for his glory and the church's good! - Jason

APPENDIX C: SERMON NOTES FOR “SPIRITUAL FORMATION AT MIDLIFE: THE OPPORTUNITY BEFORE US”

I. Intro

a. Series:

- i. *Today* / is the *first* Sunday in Lent, which we’ve already *mentioned*
 1. is that *season* of the Church calendar
 2. in which we are invited to *especially* / reflect on our relationship with *God*.
- ii. Our *sermon* series for Lent, then, is meant to *facilitate* this reflection / by *focusing* on the topic / of spiritual *formation*.
 1. I’ll say more about this *next* week, but spiritual formation – defined *briefly* – is the *process*
 - a. by which the *Holy Spirit* / forms *our* spirits / into the likeness of *Christ*.
 - b. The Holy Spirit forms *our* spirits / into the likeness of *Christ*.
 2. And so *spiritual* formation / is an *internal* work – with outward *impact*, of course – and it is thus *fitting*
 - a. for the *internal* reflection
 - b. that Lent *encourages*.
- iii. Now let me be more *specific* / about our current sermon series: We’re going to be *talking* / about *spiritual* formation / at *midlife*.
 1. In *other* words, everything we just *said* about spiritual formation,
 2. but *applied* to the context / of the middle years of our *lives*.
- b. *Qualifiers*: Now, before we get into the main *points* of this sermon, I wanted to address a couple *questions* you might have / *about* this sermon series.
 - i. The *first* / is “What if I’m not in *midlife* yet? Will there be anything in this sermon series for *me*?”
 1. And the answer is *yes*,
 - a. because this series is primarily about spiritual *formation*,
 - b. and that happens at *any* age – whether you’re a *15* year old / or a *65* year old.
 2. Plus, if you’re not *yet* in midlife, chances *are* / you will be *some* day.
 - a. So *see* this sermon series / as a way of helping you *prepare* / for what’s to *come*.
 - b. In fact, if you’re a *Millennial* –
 - i. meaning, if you were born between the years 1981 and 1996 –
 - ii. then you may all the *more* need to prepare.
 - c. And if you want to know more what I *mean* by that,
 - i. then ask me after the *service*.

- ii. I can point you to a helpful *blog* post.
 - 3. Also, even if *you're* not in midlife, this sermon series can at least help you understand someone who *is* in midlife –
 - a. maybe your *parents*, or a *co-worker*, or a *neighbor*, or other *City Liners*.
 - b. So at *least* listen / for *them*.
 - 4. That's the *first* question.
- ii. The *second* question / is "What if I've already *been* through midlife? Will this sermon series be for *me*?"
 - 1. And *again*, the answer is *yes*,
 - a. because this series is primarily about spiritual *formation*,
 - b. and because you can *always* listen / for the sake of someone *else*.
 - 2. But specifically for *you*, I would say / let this sermon series still help you *reflect* on your life – perhaps not the *present* moment, but the bigger *picture*.
 - a. As we talk about being middle *aged*,
 - i. reflect on what that stage of life was *like* for you
 - ii. and what God was doing in you *then*.
 - b. And then let *that* help you
 - i. fill out what God's been doing in the *whole* of your life,
 - ii. and then how that makes *meaning* for your life.
 - iii. So those are a *couple* questions / that I wanted to address at the *outset*.
- c. *Sermon*: Now having *addressed* those questions, let's go ahead and *turn* our attention / to the Lenten topic *itself*: *spiritual* formation / at *midlife*.
 - i. And *today*, I want us to step *into* this topic / by talking about *these* three main points:
 - 1. First, how do we *define* midlife?
 - 2. Second, what's going on in our *spirits* during midlife?
 - 3. And third, why is there an *opportunity* at midlife / for spiritual *formation*?
 - ii. So how do we *define*, what's going on in our *spirits*, and why there's an *opportunity*.

- II. ***Let's start / with the first main point, which is / how do we define midlife?*** What are we *talking* about / when we say "midlife"?
- a. *Chat*: Well, *go* ahead / and open up your *chat* screens now, and take a shot at this *question*:
 - i. "When you hear the word "*midlife*" / what do you *think* of?"
 - ii. "When you *hear* the word "*midlife*" / what do you *think* of?"

b. *Teaching:*

- i. I think perhaps the most *basic* definition of “midlife” / is it’s that *stage* of life
 1. between *young* adulthood / and *older* adulthood. *Midlife*, then, is *middle* adulthood.
 2. So if you were to draw a *timeline* / of a *typical* person’s life,
 - a. it would go from *conception*, to *birth*, to *childhood*,
 - b. to *adolescence*, to *young* adulthood, and then to *midlife*.
 3. And in *this* sense, *midlife* / is defined as a *life* stage.
- ii. We could *also* define midlife / as an *age* range.
 1. Now, there’s some *debate* / as to what that age range should *be*.
 - a. On the *starting* end, some people say that midlife begins at 35; others say 45.
 - b. On the *other* end, some people say that midlife ends at around 60; others say 65.
 2. But *everyone* seems to agree / that there *is* such thing as midlife, and there is an *age* range for it.
 3. For *our* purposes, we’ll go with age 40 to 60, with the understanding that it could be more or *less*.
- iii. And then in addition to life stage and *age* range, we could *also* define midlife / as a set of common *experiences*.
 1. For example, dealing with *health* issues / you’ve never had to *deal* with before.
 - a. You go to the *doctor*, and he or she asks you *questions*
 - b. you’ve never needed to *answer* before!
 2. There’s also changing dynamics within your *family*.
 - a. You start to take on more *responsibility* / relative to your *parents*.
 - i. When you’re *with* them,
 - ii. *you’re* actually the one / making more of the *decisions*.
 - b. And then if you have *kids*, they’re spending more time at *school* / and among *friends* / and less under your *purview*.
 - c. And about *both* of these, you *worry* more.
 3. *Speaking* of friends, you may have *less* of them –
 - a. due not only to your increasing commitments at work and at *home*,
 - b. but *also* due / to *expectations*:
 - i. we had really deep friendships *earlier* in life,
 - ii. but we just can’t imagine having the time or *energy* / to build *new* friendships like that / *now*.

4. And *then* / there are midlife *marriages* –
 - a. which are more and more *functioning* / like *business* partnerships / for running a *household*;
 - b. and we wonder how we should *feel* about that, or what we should *do* about that?
5. Of course, midlife isn't *all* bad.
 - a. For in our *midlife* years, we tend to have more *insight*, more *experience*, more *competence*.
 - b. And as a *result*, we tend to have greater *responsibility*, *impact*, and *authority*.
- iv. Now, not *everyone* in midlife / experiences *all* of these / all of the *time*, but these *are* experiences / that are typical or *common* / in the midlife *years*.
- c. *Summary*:
 - i. All in *all*, then, when we talk about *midlife*, this is what we're *referring* to:
 - ii. it's a *life* stage, it's an *age* range, it's a set of common *experiences*.
- d. *Transition*: But what *I* want to do now / is define – or at least *describe* – midlife / *spiritually*.
 - i. Because while our *physical* health / is of *course* important / and so is the health of our relationships with family and *friends*,
 - ii. who else but the *church* / is going to *talk* about / our *spiritual* health?

III. Which now *brings* us / to the *second* main point. We've talked about how we might *define* midlife. **Now let's talk about / what's going on in our *spirits* / during midlife.**

- a. *Chat*: Alright, go ahead and open up your *chat* screens again, and here's the question:
 - i. "What do you need to know / in order to *figure* out / whether you've reached the *middle* of a journey?"
 - ii. "What do you need to know / in order to *figure* out / whether you've reached the *middle* of a journey?"
- b. *Teaching*:
 - i. One of the *big* things that happens inside of us during midlife / is a *profound* realization / of our *mortality*.
 1. Sure, we've always kind of *known* / that *some* day we will die;
 2. but at *midlife*, something *clicks*,
 - a. and the fact that our time on earth is *limited*
 - b. becomes *real* in a way / that it never *has* been before.
 3. After *all*, knowing that you've reached the *middle* of a journey means that you've *realized* / there's an *end*.
 4. Now, this realization can be *triggered* / in any *number* of ways:
 - a. something happens to our *health*,
 - b. someone we know passes *away*,
 - c. we arrive at a milestone *birthday*,
 - d. we listen to a sermon series on *midlife*!

- ii. But *however* it's triggered, this *profound* realization of our mortality / causes us to take *stock* of our lives, and this then can play out / in a couple ways.
 - 1. *One way / is disappointment.*
 - a. At *midlife*, you look up the *ladder* / that you've been working hard to *climb* –
 - i. whether that be a ladder of career *accomplishment*
 - ii. or building a certain kind of *family*
 - iii. or attaining to a degree of *status* –
 - b. and you *realize* / that you just don't have enough *time* left / to get to the *top*.
 - c. Tim *Challies*, a Christian author and *pastor*, describes it *this* way:
 - i. "[When] we hit *forty* / or *forty-five*, [we] *realize* / that life is suddenly half *over*."
 - ii. [And] we are *forced* / to... *face* the fact / that we won't do *nearly* what we thought / we would *do*."
 - 2. The *other* way it can go / is towards *dissatisfaction*.
 - a. In *this* case, we *have* climbed to the top of the ladder,
 - i. we *have* attained to that / *career* accomplishment
 - ii. or *kind* of family / or *degree* of status.
 - b. But *there*, at the *top* of our ladders, we *discover*
 - i. that the happiness we *attained* to
 - ii. was *temporary*... not quite as *satisfying* / as we *thought* it would be.
 - c. Now, in our *younger* days – when the future seemed *limitless* – dissatisfaction like *that*
 - i. could be easily shrugged *off*
 - ii. by pursuing the *next* rush of success and satisfaction... we find a new *ladder*.
 - d. But by *midlife*, we know that *each* successive rush / diminishes in *power*. As *one* writer about midlife put it:
 - i. "In the *40s*, we might still acquire *degrees*, *jobs*, *homes*, and *spouses*, but *these* / elicit less *wonder* now."
- 3. Now, it's *possible* at midlife / to *not* experience high degrees of disappointment or dissatisfaction.
 - a. So maybe you're not yet at the top of your *ladder*, and / you still have hope that can *get* there.
 - b. Or maybe you *are* at the top of your ladder, and you're not *dissatisfied* about it.
 - c. If that's the case for *you*, then *great*!
 - d. Worth *thinking* about, then, is *why* that's the case for you.
 - i. What has *helped* you / to not slip into *dissatisfaction* / or *discontentment*?
 - ii. What continues to give you *hope* / when you still have more *work* to do on your ladder?

4. But for *many* at midlife,
 - a. a *nagging* disappointment / at what they've *not* been able to do
 - b. or a nagging *dissatisfaction* / about what they *have* been able to do
 - c. is very *real*.
- iii. And then *that* / leads to *disillusionment*, *disorientation*, and feeling *trapped*.
 1. By *disillusionment*,
 - a. I mean the question, "Is this *it*? Is this the rest of my *life*?
 - i. To be stuck on this *ladder* / that I can't climb to the *top* of?
 - ii. Or to be at the *top* of the ladder, but who *cares*?
 - iii. Or even to try to *change* ladders / without much hope that things will be *better*?"
 - b. And *then* / what's the *point* anymore?
 - c. Life has lost its *luster*. And we are *resentful* of it.
 2. By *disorientation*,
 - a. I mean the lack of *milestones* / or sense of *purpose*.
 - i. In our *younger* days, there *were* milestones –
 1. moving up a *grade*, getting a *driver's* license, going to *college*,
 2. starting your first real *job*, buying a *home*, and so on.
 - ii. But at *midlife*, how many meaningful milestones *remain*?
 - b. And so it's harder to *know* / which way to *go*. It's harder to have a sense of *purpose*.
 - c. And so we become *disoriented*.
 3. And then by feeling *trapped*,
 - a. I mean that at *midlife* – even with all of these things going on *inside* of us – we still have *expectations* to meet.
 - i. We *are*, after all, the *adults* in the room.
 - ii. We have to keep the *commitments* we've made –
 1. to a *spouse*, or to *children*, or to a *job*,
 2. or to parents who *need* us.
 - b. And so on the *one* hand,
 - i. we feel like something isn't *right* inside
 - ii. and we wonder if making a big change will *help*.
 - c. But then on the *other* hand,
 - i. we feel like we're hemmed in by all our *commitments*.
 - ii. We have to keep things *going*.
 - d. And so we feel *trapped*.

- iv. And for *all* of this, there is a *religious* version / as *well*.
 - 1. By *midlife*, and especially if we've been Christians for a long *time*,
 - a. we can get *tired*
 - i. of sinning the same *sins*,
 - ii. and falling to the same *temptations*,
 - iii. and feeling like we haven't grown *spiritually* / in *years*.
 - b. Our spiritual *life*, then, is a *disappointment* to us.
 - 2. *Also* by *midlife*, the things that used to "work for us" –
 - a. such as learning new things from the *Bible*,
 - b. serving in an exciting *ministry*,
 - c. going to special *conferences* –
 - d. they just don't feel like they *satisfy* anymore.
 - 3. And this *all* leads / to that *same* sense / of *disillusionment* / and *disorientation* / and feeling *trapped*.
 - a. You still go to *church*, you still go through the *motions*,
 - b. but your *faith* / doesn't feel *alive* anymore.
 - c. And you *don't* know / what to *do*.
- c. *Exhortation*: No *wonder* so many people in *midlife* / are *tempted* / to resort to unhealthy *responses*.
 - i. *Everything* I just described –
 - 1. that profound realization of mortality and *limitation*,
 - 2. that pervasive experience of disappointment or *dissatisfaction*,
 - 3. the *disillusionment* / and *disorientation* / and feeling of being *trapped* / that *follows* –
 - 4. *none* of it / is *fun*. *All* of it / is *trying* / and *challenging*.
 - 5. And so what do we *do*?
 - ii. We try to *escape*.
 - 1. We try to *numb* ourselves / from *feeling* that way.
 - 2. And there are a lot of ways we can *do* this –
 - a. ranging from full on *substance* abuse
 - b. to becoming a *workaholic*
 - c. to *gorging* ourselves / on mindless *entertainment*.
 - iii. Or if we *don't* try to *escape*, then what we do is we try to start *over*.
 - 1. We don't like how our lives have ended *up*, and so we go for a *redo*.
 - 2. And *again*, there are a lot of ways we can *do* this –
 - a. ranging from blowing up our *marriages*
 - b. to cosmetic *surgery*
 - c. to quitting our *jobs* / and starting something entirely *new*.
 - iv. Or if we don't try to *escape* / or try to start *over*, then we just / grin and *bear* it.
 - 1. We just keep slogging through *life*, going through the *motions*, making sure we meet *expectations* –
 - 2. not doing anything drastic or *wrong*,
 - 3. but *also* not working through / what's going on *inside* of us / and not *growing* through the process / *either*.

d. *Summary:*

- i. And *all* of this / is what can go on *inside* of us – in our *spirits* – during *midlife*.
- ii. And it's good to just *acknowledge* that. And in *some* cases, *lament* that.
- iii. It's part of living life with *God*.
 1. We put *words* to our struggles
 2. so that *he* can respond with words / of love and *hope*.

IV. Which now *brings* us / to the **third** main point: ***why midlife / is actually an opportunity for spiritual formation.***

- a. And that's *really* / how a lot of people who have *been* through midlife / *describe* it... it's a time of *opportunity*!
 - i. Richard *Rohr*, a well-known *contemplative* author, writes:
 1. "*Most* of us / tend to think of the *second* half of life
 - a. as largely about getting *old*,
 - b. dealing with *health* issues,
 - c. and letting go of our physical *life*,
 2. [but it] is *exactly* / the *opposite*."
 - ii. Bob *Buford*, who started a midlife ministry called *Halftime*, *agrees*:
 1. "The *prevailing* view in our culture / is that as you close out your fortieth year or so, you enter a period of aging and *decline*....
 2. [But] this is a *myth* / I refuse to *believe*....
 3. You are [*actually*] / ready for new *horizons*, and new *challenges*.
You are ready to *move* / from *success* / to *significance*."
 - iii. And then Michelle Van *Loon*, who *also* writes about midlife and spiritual formation,
 1. adds that "*midlife* / carries new *gifts* / and *challenges*
 2. unique to this *life* stage."
 - iv. So a *lot* of people are saying / that for all of its *challenges* – even *spiritual* challenges – *midlife* / is *actually* a time / of great *opportunity*.
 1. Midlife is a *time* / when something can *happen* to us – deep in our *spirits* –
 2. that *changes* us / and *matures* us / and causes us to *grow*
 3. in ways that are *profound* / and *significant*.
- b. And the book of *Ecclesiastes* / *agrees*.
 - i. *Chat*: Alright, *one* last time. *Open* up your chat screens,
 1. and *tell* me what you think of / when you *hear* the title / "*Ecclesiastes*"?
 2. *What* do you think of / when you hear "*Ecclesiastes*"?

- ii. If you were here a couple *years* ago / when I preached through *Ecclesiastes*, then you know that *Qohelet* – also translated “*Preacher*” – is one of *two* speakers in the book.
 - 1. And for almost *11* chapters, what he *does* / is he *laments*.
 - 2. And if you listen *carefully*, then you’ll *notice* / that he *laments* / like someone in *midlife*.
 - a. For Qohelet is *keenly* aware / of the *limitations* of his life... and in *particular*, the ultimate limitation of *death*.
 - b. As *such*,
 - i. he sees no *point* / in accumulating *pleasure* / or *wealth*:
 - 1. “I said of *laughter*, ‘It is *mad*,’
 - 2. and of *pleasure*, ‘What *use* is it?’”
 - ii. It’s *also* why he sees no point / in hard *work* / or *accomplishment*:
 - 1. “I *hated* life... I hated all my toil in which I toil under the *sun*,
 - 2. seeing that I must leave it to the *man* / who will come *after* me.”
 - iii. And it’s *also* why he sees no point in cultivating *wisdom*:
 - 1. “What happens to the *fool* / will happen to me *also*.
 - 2. *Why* then / have I been so very *wise*?”
 - iv. In fact, about *all* things, Qohelet repeats this *refrain*:
 - 1. “All is *vanity*... a *striving* after the wind...
 - 2. *nothing* to be gained / under the *sun*.”
 - c. Pete Enns – in his *commentary* on *Ecclesiastes* – *concludes*:
 - i. “*Death* is a dominant theme...
 - ii. for it is the specter of *death*
 - 1. that *routinely* nullifies
 - 2. whatever *positive* conclusions / Qohelet might *draw*.”
- 3. It’s *clear*, then, that *Qohelet* / is a prime *example* of someone / *struggling* through the spiritual challenges / of *midlife*.
 - a. Everything from the realization of mortality and *limitedness*,
 - b. to the disappointment and dissatisfaction that *follows*,
 - c. to the resulting disillusionment and disorientation and feeling *trapped* –
 - d. it’s *all* / *there*.

- iii. But then at the *end* of the book, the *second* speaker – the *narrator* – he finally steps in / and proclaims his *evaluation* / of Qohelet's *lament*.
 - 1. And what he *does* / is he *validates* it, and he tells us the *reader*
 - a. that Qohelet's *words* / are like "*goads*,"
 - b. and like nails firmly *fixed* / are the collected *sayings*;
 - c. they are *given* / by one *Shepherd*."
 - 2. In *other* words,
 - a. *all* the difficult experiences of midlife that Qohelet talks about –
 - i. and especially all the difficult things
 - ii. going on spiritually *inside* of us at midlife –
 - b. they may feel *unpleasant* / and even *painful* – like *goads* / and *nails* in our sides –
 - c. but God actually intends to *use* them / to *shepherd* us.
 - i. He intends to *use* them
 - ii. to *guide* us / and *shape* us / and *form* us
 - iii. in really good ways.
 - 3. And if *God* sees such an opportunity at midlife, then *that* means / we can *too*!
 - c. *Gospel*: So *perhaps* now we're beginning to see / that, *yes*, something *good* – something even *spiritually* good – *can* happen / at midlife.
 - i. Because *maybe* you thought / it wasn't going to be *possible*.
 - 1. *Maybe* you thought
 - a. that spiritual growth was something that happened / only in your *younger* years,
 - b. and *now* all you can do / is barely hold *on*.
 - 2. *Maybe* you *feel* like
 - a. I can hardly *maintain* my faith right now, let alone *grow*!
 - b. And maybe that's about as good as it *gets* right now.
 - ii. But *no*, your Good Shepherd / has far *greater* plans for you.
 - 1. You see, Jesus paid too great a *cost* – giving up even his life on the *cross* – for us to just have a "barely hold *on*" kind of faith.
 - 2. And when Jesus rose victoriously from the *grave*, he *showed*
 - a. that new life in *him*
 - b. *has* to be more / than mere *maintenance*.
 - iii. Listen, *God* / has *graciously* given us / *new* life in Christ through faith in him,
 - 1. and so his *plan* for us – in *every* stage of our lives – is *nothing* less
 - a. than that we be *formed* / *more* and more
 - b. into the *glorious* image / of his *Son*.
 - 2. *God* / will *not* settle / for *anything* less / than *that*.

- d. The *deepest* questions of midlife
 - i. are *not* about how to stay healthy / or how to make a *career* change / or how to parent your *teenager* / or even how to revive your *marriage*.
 - ii. *Rather*, they are *questions*
 - 1. about dreams and *limitations*,
 - 2. about hopes and *disappointments*,
 - 3. about desire and *dissatisfaction*,
 - 4. about *purpose* / and about *meaning*.
 - iii. And *these* / are *spiritual* questions.
 - 1. They are questions that *sit*
 - 2. in the *innermost* part / of who we *are*.
 - iv. And if we're willing to *go* there, if we're willing to *work* on these questions / and bring them before *God*, then I *know*
 - 1. that his Holy Spirit will be *delighted*
 - 2. to *shape* us / and *grow* us / and *bless* us / *through* them.

V. **Conclusion**

- a. So *how* does it happen? *How* does the Holy Spirit / *work* through our midlife years / to make us more like *Jesus*?
 - i. Well, that's what we'll be *talking* about
 - ii. for the rest of the *sermon* series!
- b. But what we've done so far *today*
 - i. is we've *defined* midlife. We talked about how it's a *life* stage, an *age* range, and a set of common *experiences*.
 - ii. And we've talked about what all might be going on *inside* of us – *spiritually* – *during* midlife.
 - 1. There's that profound realization of *mortality*,
 - 2. that taking *stock* of our lives / and the disappointment or dissatisfaction that *follows*.
 - 3. And then there's the *disillusionment*, *disorientation*, and the feeling of being *trapped*
 - 4. that can tempt us to try to *escape* / or *start over* / or just grin and *bear* it.
 - iii. But *in* all this, we know that midlife is actually a great *opportunity* / for the Holy Spirit to *form* us.
 - 1. Mainly because the Lord is *faithful*.
 - 2. But *also* because / midlife is such a spiritual *time* –
 - a. a time when we're *invited* / to ask the deep *questions* about our lives,
 - b. a time when we can *encounter* / struggles too *great* for us,
 - c. and so a time when we can profoundly *experience* / the *powerful* grace of God / *at work*.
- c. So *spiritual* formation / *at midlife*. That's what we'll be *talking* about / this *Lent*.

- d. *Reflection questions:*
- i. Now *usually*, I would end my sermon *here*. But for *this* series, I'd like to *invite* us / to take things a bit *further*.
 - ii. And so for each of the sermons in this *series*, I'm going to *conclude* / with one or two *reflection* questions –
 1. questions that I'll also send *out* / with the email *announcements*
 2. that you can *ponder*, *journal* about, or perhaps even *talk* about / with someone you *trust*.
 - iii. This is, of course, totally *optional*. No one's going to check your *homework*. But it *is* meant / to be *helpful*. So here are the *questions*:
 1. Do you *resonate* / with any of the midlife spiritual *dynamics* / discussed in the second main *point*?
 - a. So that's the *disappointment*, the *dissatisfaction*, and so forth.
 - b. And if *so*, then *how* so?
 2. If you're *not* in midlife,
 - a. then what do you think are the common experiences of the stage of life / that you *are* in?
 - b. And then what are the *spiritual* challenges and opportunities / *there*?
 - iv. So I *invite* you / to *take* some time over the next week / to *reflect* on these questions. And we'll keep *talking* about this!

Let's pray together.

APPENDIX D: SERMON NOTES FOR "SPIRITUAL FORMATION AT MIDLIFE: WHY IT'S IMPORTANT"

I. **Intro**

a. *Hook:*

- i. "I don't *care* about how I play the game, I want to *win*!"
 1. *Susie* / is an 8th grader / on the girls' soccer team, and she's *good* at it. So is her *team... usually*.
 2. But *today*, the game wasn't going their *way*.
 - a. The other team was *faster* / and *stronger*, and – frankly – *meaner*.
 - b. The referees *do* penalize unsportsmanlike conduct, but the players on the *other* team
 - i. somehow knew *just* when to give that taunting look
 - ii. or *just* how loud to mutter that insult / so that only *Susie's team* could hear.
 - c. And *boy*, *Susie* *really* wanted to dish it right back at them. And so she *did*.
 - d. But here *again*, she *wasn't* quite as effective as the other team.
 - i. A referee *saw* it / and *heard* it,
 - ii. and threw up the yellow *card*.
 3. *Susie's coach* / pulled her *aside*.
 - a. It was just a *brief* conversation – there was still a *game* going on – but it *ended* with the usual,
 - i. "*Susie*, it's not whether you win or *lose*,
 - ii. but it's how you play the *game*."
 - b. And to *that*, *Susie* *retorted* with frustration, "I don't *care* about how I play the game, I want to *win*!"
- ii. There's a *little* bit of *Susie* / in *all* of us.
 1. We want to win the *game*. We want things to go our *way*.
 - a. We want to do *whatever* we need to do
 - b. to bend the *circumstances* and the situation / to our *will*.
 2. And *yeah* sure,
 - a. it's not a *bad* thing to become a better person along the way,
 - b. but that's *not* / what we care about *most*.
 3. And honestly, the *worst* thing anyone can say to us / when we *don't* get what we want
 - a. is, "Well, at least you *learned* something from this,"
 - b. or "Well, at least it builds *character*."
 4. We just want to *take* those words / and *spit* them right back:

- a. “That’s a *lame* consolation prize!
 - b. I don’t want *character*. I want to *win*!”
 - b. *Series*: Last week, we began our *Lenten* sermon series / on spiritual formation at *midlife*.
 - i. We talked through a few *definitions* of midlife,
 - ii. we described what can happen inside of us *spiritually* during midlife,
 - iii. and we *even* talked through / how to listen to this series if you’re *not* in midlife.
 - 1. So if you’re *younger*, then see this series as a way to *prepare* / for what’s to *come*.
 - 2. If you’re *older*, then use it as way to *reflect* / on what’s already taken *place*.
 - 3. And *either* way, listen for the spiritual *formation* parts / that *do* apply to your stage in life.
 - iv. And *then* we closed / by talking about how the *midlife* years / are a *great* opportunity / for spiritual *formation*.
 - c. *Sermon*:
 - i. And there’s that *word* again: *spiritual* / *formation*.
 - 1. Last week, we defined it as the *process* / by which the *Holy* Spirit / forms *our* spirits / into the image of *Christ*.
 - 2. God’s work of spiritual *formation*, then,
 - a. focuses not on our *external* circumstances or situations,
 - b. but on the *interior* life / of our *character*... on our *spirit*.
 - 3. In *other* words, spiritual *formation* / is not about whether we win or *lose*, but about how we play the *game*.
 - ii. And how do you *feel* about that? There’s a *little* bit of Susie / in *all* of us.
 - 1. *No*, God.
 - a. I *really* would rather we beat this pandemic *now*,
 - b. instead of learning patience and *trust*.
 - 2. *No*, God.
 - a. I *really* would rather life be *easier*,
 - b. instead of growing in steadfastness and *endurance*.
 - 3. *No*, God.
 - a. I *really* would rather midlife be a walk in the *park*, instead of it being a time
 - i. of realizing my *mortality* / and *limitation*,
 - ii. leading to *disappointment* / and *dissatisfaction*,
 - iii. resulting in *disillusionment* / and *disorientation* / and feeling *trapped*.
 - iv. We talked about these things *last* week.
 - b. I really would rather skip *all* of that, instead of you *using* it / to make me more like *Jesus*.
 - 4. Because *honestly*, “becoming like *Jesus*” / sounds a *lot* like / a *lame* consolation prize.

- iii. But it's *not*. And today's *sermon* / is about *why* not. *Why* spiritual formation is so important. *Why* it's even *more* important
 - 1. than *winning*, or bending circumstances to our *will*,
 - 2. or *even* / fixing the problems of this *world*.
 - a. Not that God doesn't *care* about fixing the problems of this world – he *will*, every last *one* of them –
 - b. but that actually can't *happen* / until he fixes *us*.
- iv. So *why* spiritual formation is important – *that's* what we're talking about / *today*.

II. But before we go there, let me say a *bit* more / about what spiritual formation is.

- a. *Chat*: So go ahead and open up your chat screens / and take a shot at this question:
 - i. What are different things / that might *influence* / or *shape* / our *interior* life?
 - 1. So what might influence or *shape*
 - 2. our *thoughts* / or our *feelings* / or our *desires* / or our *choices*?
 - ii. Good answers! I'll come back to this in a *moment*.
- b. *Teaching*: The *definition* of spiritual formation that we're working with / has three parts – a *subject*, an *object*, and a *goal*.
 - i. The *object* – the thing being *formed* – is our *spirits*.
 - 1. Which is that *non-physical* / *interior* part / of who we *are*.
 - a. It's our *thoughts* / and *feelings* / and *desires* / and *will*,
 - b. all *mashed* together / to make up our *character*.
 - 2. Biblical words like "*soul*" / and "*heart*" / get at the same *idea*.
 - 3. Spiritual *formation*, then,
 - a. is focused not on changing our external *circumstances*,
 - b. but on cultivating our internal *character*, our *spirits*.
 - 4. That's the *object*.
 - ii. So now, what is the *subject*? What are our spirits being formed *by*? Or – as we just discussed – what might influence or *shape* / our *interior* life?
 - 1. And the *answer* – as you guys showed in the chat – is a *lot* of things!
 - a. The *news* / might inform our *thoughts*.
 - b. *Music* / might amplify our *feelings*.
 - c. *Commercials* / might direct our *desires*.
 - d. Social *media* / might influence the choices of our *wills*.
 - 2. Every human being / has a *spirit*, and that *spirit*
 - a. is *constantly* being formed and shaped
 - b. by all *sorts* of things.
 - 3. And so in a *sense*, spiritual *formation* / isn't just a *Christian* thing; it's a *human* thing.

- iii. What makes spiritual formation *Christian*, then,
 - 1. is when it's the *Holy Spirit* / who is the subject, when it's *he* / who does the forming;
 - 2. *and* / when becoming like *Jesus* / is the *goal*, when the Spirit is *forming* us / into the image of *Christ*.
 - 3. Indeed, that's what the Apostle Paul *tells* us / in our 2 Corinthians chapter 3 text this *morning*:
 - a. Every believer is being *transformed*
 - b. into the *image* of the Lord
 - c. from *one* degree of glory to another,
 - d. and this *comes* / from the *Spirit*.
 - 4. So if our spirits are like *pottery* clay,
 - a. then the *Holy Spirit* / is the potter *forming* us,
 - b. and the pottery mold that *guides* him / is none other than *Christ himself*.
- iv. In *this* sense, spiritual *formation* / is a lot like *discipleship* / or *sanctification* – the *goal*
 - 1. is that the *individual* believer
 - 2. becomes more like *Christ*.
- c. *Summary*: So this is what spiritual formation *is*, and this is how we'll use the term going *forward* – it's the *process*
 - i. by which the *Holy Spirit* (subject)
 - ii. forms *our* spirits (object)
 - iii. into the image of *Christ* (goal).

III. **And now we're ready / to talk about why spiritual formation is so important.**

- a. *Chat*: And to get us *started*, I have a little *chat* question / for us to *discuss*:
 - i. *What* are some different labels / for *time* periods / in *history*?
 - 1. Possible answers might be "*Cold War*" / or "*Industrial Revolution*" / or "*Information Age*," and so on.
 - 2. *What* are different labels / for *time* periods / in *history*?
 - ii. Good answers! I'll come back to this in just a *moment*.
- b. *Teaching*: If you read up on the topic of spiritual formation and why it's a good *thing*, then *much* of what you'll find / is about how it blesses *us*. And it certainly *does*.
 - i. As we read earlier in Ephesians 4, when the Holy Spirit matures us into the fullness of *Christ*, we become *like* him / in so many wonderful *ways*.
 - 1. We are less tossed to and *fro*, and more *anchored* / by our identity in *him*.
 - a. We have a stronger sense of who we *are* –
 - b. what some call our "*true self*" –
 - c. and the ups and downs of success and *failure* / as well as the praise and criticism of people's *opinions*
 - d. don't *shake* us as much.

2. We are also less *vulnerable* / to things like *deceit*,
 - a. and instead we are more *rooted*
 - b. in *faith* / and *knowledge* / and *truth*.
3. And because we are more secure in God's *love* for us,
 - a. we are more *free* / to love *others*
 - b. with *generosity* / and *compassion* / and *grace*.
- ii. And I mean, who *wouldn't* want to grow in all these ways?
- c. *Teaching 2:* But as *good* as spiritual formation is / for *us*, the *main* reasons why it's so important / aren't *about* us; they're about *God*. Let me tell you what they *are*.
 - i. The *first* reason / has to do with the historical *time* period / that we're *in*.
 1. Now we can label periods of history / in all *sorts* of ways. And you guys have named quite a *few* of them / in the *chat*.
 2. But this is how *God* labels our current time period: it is *now* / the age of the *Spirit*.
 - a. That's what Jesus explains to his *disciples* / in John chapter 16.
 - b. That's what the Apostle *Peter* tells us / in Acts chapter 2.
 - c. And that's what the Apostle *Paul* talks about / in Ephesians 1.
 - d. From that *first* Pentecost Sunday / *two* thousand years ago / *up* until that day / when Jesus *returns*,
 - i. the *time* period we now live in
 - ii. is the *age* / of the *Spirit*.
 3. It *follows*, then, that if it is *indeed* the age of the Spirit, then the *work* of the Spirit / must be *important*! And it *is*!
 - a. For it is because of the *Spirit*
 - i. that the Gospel about Jesus' death and *resurrection*
 1. is not just some *story* to you,
 2. but is actually good *news* to you!
 - ii. How he has atoned for your *sin* / and gives you hope for new *life*
 1. is actually *meaningful* to you,
 2. and expresses God's *love* to you –
 - iii. all because of the *Spirit*.
 - b. And then it's because of the Holy *Spirit* / that this Gospel is *changing* you –
 - i. making you respond with love for *God* / through a saving *faith*,
 - ii. and even now *forming* you / into the image of his *Son*.
 4. And so the *first* reason / why the Spirit's work of formation is *important* / is because it's his *time* right now.
 - a. The spotlight is on *him*. It's *his* work / that is moving history *forward*.
 - b. To *not* engage in spiritual formation, then, is to be on the *outside* / of what God is *doing*.

- ii. The *second* main reason why spiritual formation is so important / is because God can't fix the *world* / *without* it. What do I *mean*?
 - 1. Do you remember how the world got broken in the *first* place?
 - a. It wasn't because of *God*; it was because of *humanity*.
 - b. It was because Adam and *Eve* – who did not have the Holy Spirit at work *inside* of them –
 - i. let *sin* into the world,
 - ii. and along *with* it / suffering and *death*.
 - c. And *now* – centuries and millennia *later* – the world is *filled* / with terrible *sin* / and ongoing *suffering*.
 - 2. Now *what* do you think would happen
 - a. if God decided to fix the *world* / without first fixing *us*?
 - i. If God *perfected* / *every* external circumstance / so that nothing is *broken* anymore,
 - ii. but *we* / are still *sinners* / who fall short of God's *glory*?
 - b. What will *happen* / is that it'll be *no* time
 - i. before we ruin everything *again*...
 - ii. just like Adam and *Eve* did.
 - 3. *This* is why / the work of spiritual *formation* – the Spirit's work of *making* us / more like our sinless *Savior* – is so *important*.
 - a. For *only* when that work is done –
 - b. *only* when we've matured into the fullness of Christ –
 - c. can God *fix* the world / and it *stay* / *fixed*.
 - 4. And so the *second* reason why spiritual formation is so important / is because God can't fix the *world* / *without* it.
- iii. And then the *third* main reason / why spiritual formation is *important* / is because it's how we'll bring ultimate *glory* / to *Christ*.
 - 1. The Apostle Paul writes in Romans 8 verse 29
 - a. that those whom God *foreknew*, he also *predestined* / to be conformed to the image of his *Son*.
 - b. In *other* words, God's vision for our *future* / is that we become like *Jesus*.
 - c. We already *know* this.
 - 2. But then in verse 29, Paul takes it even *further*, and adds *one* final / *purpose* clause:
 - a. "in order that *he* / might be the *firstborn* / among many *brothers*."
 - b. Do you see what Paul is *saying* here? He's *saying*
 - i. that spiritual formation *will* make us better people like Christ, and that is good for *us*.
 - ii. But there's an even *greater* purpose / than *that*.

3. There's this *scene* / in *Avenger's Endgame*.
 - a. Wow, that was so great to say. I haven't used a *Marvel Comics* illustration in so long!
 - b. Anyways, there's this scene in *Avenger's Endgame* / when it looks like the *bad* guys are about to win, and the good guys are about to *lose*.
 - i. It's just one *lonely* Captain America – the *leader* of the Avengers –
 1. with a *broken* shield
 2. and *barely* able to stand
 - ii. against *Thanos*, with his *countless* hordes / and his *flying* monsters / and his *intergalactic* spaceship / with its huge *cannons*.
 - iii. And it seems like *all* / is *lost*.
 - c. But *then*, in his *earpiece*, he hears the voice of his old friend Sam *Wilson*: "on your *left*."
 - i. And *that's* when / *one* by one / you see magical portals *open*,
 - ii. and then *out* of them / come *streaming* / his *friends*, his brothers and sisters-in-*arms*:
 1. Falcon, Black Panther, Doctor Strange,
 2. Scarlet Witch, Spider-Man and *all* the rest.
 - iii. It's *everyone*. And it's *glorious*.
 - d. And then how can you *not* cheer / when *Captain America* –
 - i. *reenergized* by the arrival of his friends –
 - ii. says, "*Avengers, Assemble!*"
4. *That's* what it will be like – but far *better* – when Jesus *returns*.
 - a. Because *he* doesn't need our help / the way *Captain America* needed help, but he still *calls* us / to stand *with* him.
 - b. For this is what history is *moving* towards: *Jesus* – standing not *alone*,
 - i. but standing as the *firstborn* / among *many* brothers and sisters,
 - ii. and standing as *King* / over a great *kingdom* / of sacred *citizens*.
 - c. And *make* no mistake, when he assembles *all* the redeemed, *you* and I – who have *trusted* in him / in *this* lifetime – we will *be* there.
 - i. *Not* because we are heroes in ourselves – in fact, we were originally *villains* –
 - ii. but because the Holy *Spirit*
 1. is now graciously *forming* us
 2. into the *likeness* of our perfect hero Jesus
 3. so that we *can* stand / by his *side*.

5. So yes, spiritual formation *is* good for us. No doubt *about* that.
 - a. But the *greater* purpose / is that it *glorifies* / Christ.
 - b. And *that* is why / it's so *important*!
- d. *Exhortation:*
 - i. Now let me be *clear*.
 1. The *internal* work of spiritual formation / is not the *only* thing that Christians are called to.
 - a. Our external actions *also* matter to God,
 - b. especially how we act towards the people *around* us.
 2. And it is not *wrong* / to pray for God to show *mercy* / and fix our difficult *circumstances*.
 - ii. But what I want us to *see* / is that spiritual *formation* / is *not* a consolation prize.
 1. The Soccer *Susie* part of us / might *agree* / that broken character is a *problem*,
 2. but it *tends* to think / that broken *circumstances* / are the *bigger* problem.
 - iii. But that's not how *God* looks at it.
 1. Yes, spiritual formation is *focused* / on *internal* change / at the level of our *spirits*.
 2. But that does *not* mean / that it is *small*.
 3. Rather, I hope by now we *realize* / that spiritual *formation* / is actually quite *big*.
 - a. It's *big* / because we live in the age of the *Spirit* / and that's what's on his *agenda*.
 - b. It's *big* / because it's what needs to *happen* / before God can fix the *world*.
 - c. And it's *big* / because it's how *God* / is going to bring *ultimate* glory / to his *Son*.
 - iv. And *all* of that / is why *spiritual* formation / is so *important*.

Transition: And now the question I hope you're asking is,

- "Well, if it's so *important*, then how do I *do* it?"
- How do I *participate* with the Spirit / as he forms *my* spirit / into the image of *Christ*?"

IV. So let's now move *in* to talking about / **how we can *participate* / in spiritual *formation*.**

- a. *Chat:* Alright, *one* last time. *Open* up your chat screens, and answer this *question*:
 - i. "What are *traits* / or *mannerisms* / or *values* / that you feel like you've *inherited* / from your *parents*?"
 1. "What are *traits* / or *mannerisms* / or *values*
 2. that you feel like you've *inherited* / from your *parents*?"
 - ii. Thanks for your answers!

b. *Teaching:*

i. When we talk about how we might participate in spiritual *formation*, what our text today in 2 Corinthians *shows* us / is that we *have* to start / with *Jesus*.

1. For it is when we *behold* the glory of the Lord, *that* is when / we are being *transformed* / into his *image*.

a. Paul Barnett writes in his *commentary* on this passage /

b. that “the verbs ‘*behold*’ / and ‘*transformed*’ / are both *present* tense,

c. suggesting that the *second* / occurs at the same *time* as – and as a *result* of – the *first*.

d. *As we behold, so we are transformed.*”

2. And we’ve all *experienced* this –

a. not just with *Jesus*, but also with other human *beings* / that we’ve spent a lot of *time* with, including our *parents*.

b. We *inherit* from them / *traits* and *mannerisms* and *values* – we become *like* them – because we’ve been *beholding* them.

i. We’ve been in their *presence*, listened to their *words*, had *conversations* with them,

ii. observed what they *do*, and even joined them in *doing* it.

c. And whether or not we understand the *mechanics* / of how all this *influences* us, the *fact* is / we know it *does*.

3. Here’s my *point*.

a. There’s a *lot* we can say / about *different* techniques

i. for reading the *Bible* / or *praying* / or applying things we’re *learning* / or going deeper in *community*.

ii. But *none* of it / will actually be *spiritually* formative / *unless* / they help us behold *Jesus*.

b. And this is what it *means* / to behold *Jesus*:

i. it means being in his *presence*, listening to his *Word*, praying in *conversation* with him,

ii. looking for what he’s *doing*, and even joining him in *doing* it.

c. And when we *behold* him like that, *this* is what will happen:

i. we will see the *beauty* / of his perfect *character*;

ii. we will be taste more *richly* / the sweetness of his *love*;

iii. we will rejoice that we can *trust* / in his *good* authority;

iv. we will rest in the *hope* / that he is *faithful* / to all of his *promises*.

d. And then that’s how we become / *beautiful* / and *loving* / and *good* / and *faithful*.

4. If we want to *participate* / in spiritual *formation*, then we have to *behold* *Jesus* / to become *like* him.

- ii. We *also* / have to open up our inner *selves*.
 - 1. The *object* of spiritual formation, after all, is our *spirits*.
 - 2. And so we need to be willing to *go* there. We need to be willing to dig *deep*
 - a. into our *motivations* / and *thought* patterns,
 - b. why we said what we *said* / or did what we *did*,
 - c. what are the triggers that we are *vulnerable* to,
 - d. and what are the characteristic idols we *turn* to / when we are *stressed* / or *anxious*.
 - 3. Because *that* / is where the *Spirit* wants to go.
 - a. He doesn't want us to just know things *about* God / or do things *for* God;
 - b. he wants us to be changed from the inside *out* / *by* God.
 - 4. So we have to dig *deep*.
- iii. Finally, we have to *suffer*.
 - 1. That's right.
 - a. Circumstances and situations have to go / *not* our way.
 - b. We have to *lose*.
 - 2. Now, the Soccer *Susie* part of us wants to say, "But can't we have *both*? Can't we *win* / *and* be spiritually formed?"
 - a. And the answer is *yes*. *Absolutely*. God can use *any* circumstance to form us into the image of Christ.
 - b. But the *point* is / he *especially* uses / *suffering*.
 - 3. Why? Well, remember what *Jesus* is like; he *is*, after all, the *goal* of spiritual formation.
 - a. What *defines* Jesus' earthly ministry
 - i. is his *suffering*,
 - ii. is his going to the *cross* / in trusting obedience to his *Father*.
 - b. And if that's what defines what our *Savior* is like, then to become *like* him
 - i. means *we* too / have to *suffer*.
 - ii. *We* too / have to *deny* ourselves, and take up our *cross*.
 - c. This is not to say that suffering is *good*, but it *is* to say
 - i. that suffering is *redemptive*,
 - ii. and our *spirits* / can't be formed *without* it.
 - 4. And so things like *losing*, and broken *circumstances*, and situations we'd rather not *experience* –
 - a. if our spirits are like *pottery* clay, and the Holy Spirit is the *potter*, and Jesus is our pottery *mold*,
 - b. then *these* things – these *sufferings* – are the *kiln* / that *sets* our shape / in *everlasting* ways.

c. *Summary:*

- i. So *this* is how we participate / in spiritual *formation*.
 1. We *behold* Jesus / to become *like* him.
 2. And we dig *deep* into ourselves / so that *more* of ourselves can become like him.
 3. And of *course*, there are practices and techniques we can *adopt* / to help us *do* these things.
 4. But we *also* / have to endure suffering with *faith*,
 - a. trusting that *God* / is making us more like *Jesus*
 - b. *even* – or *especially* – *through* it.
- ii. And for *all* of this, we depend on the Holy *Spirit*.
 1. Because, *ultimately*, spiritual formation is *his* work.
 2. *He* is the one forming us, and *we* / are simply invited to *join* him, to cooperate *with* him, to come *alongside* of him.

V. **Conclusion**

- a. *Summary:* So what spiritual formation *is*, why it's *important*, and how we can *participate*.
- b. *Re-hook:* Now, *what* does all this have to do / with *midlife*?
 - i. What I'm *about* to say / is not *exclusive* to midlife.
 1. There are *other* times in our lives
 2. when what I'm *about* to say / can *also* happen.
 - ii. But midlife *is* a stage in our lives / when we are invited to *realize* – or when we are *confronted* with the realization – that we are *limited*.
 1. Limited by *death*. And so limited in *time*.
 2. Limited by the ladders we can't *climb*.
 3. And *even* limited in our satisfaction / over the ladders we *can* climb.
 - iii. In *other* words, we are like Soccer *Susie* –
 1. *frustrated* / that the opposing team of limitation and *death* / is getting *faster* / and *stronger* / and *meaner*.
 2. And we just want to *beat* them back; we just want to *win* against them.
 - iv. But *God* is our coach.
 1. And at *midlife*, he pulls us *aside*, and wants us to *realize* / that *actually* what matters to him
 - a. is how we play the *game*,
 - b. is how our *spirits* / are being *formed*.
 2. And *frankly*, human beings don't readily *learn* that lesson / as long as we're *winning*.
 3. But it's when we're *losing* – when we profoundly *realize* / that we *are* limited / and that we *are* mortal –
 - a. *that's* when we're much more ready / to learn the *lesson*...
 - b. *that's* when we're more *open* / to the inner work of spiritual *formation*.

- c. *Next week*: There's *more* to be said about all of this, of course. And we *will*!
 - i. *Next* week, I'll present a *model* / for how spiritual formation can *happen* during midlife.
 - ii. And then the week *after*, I'll present a *story* / of how spiritual formation *did* happen / for someone during *their* midlife.
- d. *Reflection questions*: Now, I said *last* week / that for the sermons in this *series* / I would *conclude* / with a couple *reflection* questions.
 - i. So *here* they are / for *this* week:
 - 1. *What* spiritual disciplines / are you currently *practicing*?
 - a. And are they helping you to behold *Christ*?
 - b. If *not*, then what could you do to *change* that?
 - 2. Is it easy or *difficult* for you / to *reflect* on yourself / and articulate what's going on inside your *spirit*? Why do you think that *is*?
 - ii. So *two* questions / to *consider* in response / to this *sermon*.

Let's pray together.

APPENDIX E: SERMON NOTES FOR “SPIRITUAL FORMATION AT MIDLIFE: A MODEL FOR HOW IT HAPPENS”

I. **Introduction**

- a. *Chat*: Well, to get us *started* this morning, go ahead and open up your chat screens, and take a shot at this *question*: What are / *different* models of growth / that you can *think* of?
 - i. So I'll be talking about a model for *spiritual* growth;
 - ii. what are *other* kinds of growth / that people have *modeled* / or made *charts* for / or diagrammed *out*?
 - iii. (*examples* = *chart of a baby's growth inside the womb, and outside the womb*)
- b. *Series*: This Lent, our *sermon* series / is talking about spiritual *formation*,
 - i. which we've *defined*
 - 1. as the process by which the *Holy Spirit* / forms *our* spirits / into the image of *Christ*.
 - 2. In *other* words, it's how the Spirit helps us grow *up* / to be like *Jesus*.
 - ii. Now *last* week, we saw why this inner work of spiritual formation / is so *important*.
- c. *Sermon*: This week, what I want to do / is *present* to you / a *model* for spiritual formation.
 - i. And it's called the "*critical journey*" / by Janet Hagberg / and Robert Guelich.
 - 1. In the same way that *theologians* / write systematic *theologies* /
 - a. to make sense of *all* that the Bible might say
 - b. on any given topic like *sin* / or *salvation*,
 - 2. so Hagberg and Guelich / have endeavored to systematize a *model*
 - a. for how the Holy Spirit might form our *spirits*
 - b. into the image of *Christ*.
 - ii. And I think this model can be *helpful* for us.
 - iii. Now of course,
 - 1. *no* human endeavor is perfect.
 - 2. And the Holy Spirit is not bound to any *model*.
 - iv. But models like *this* one
 - 1. can still *help* us have a sense / for what spiritual growth *looks* like,
 - 2. and even *suggest* ways / to *support* that growth.
- d. *Outline*:
 - i. So *let* me now present the model to you.
 - ii. And then after I *do* that, I'll talk about how this model can *help* us / with spiritual formation at *midlife*...
 - 1. because that stage of *life* / is *also* what we're focusing on

- 2. for this Lenten *sermon* series.
- iii. But more on that *later*.

II. Right now, let me introduce to you / Hagberg and Guelich's / model.

- a. According to them, there are six stages / of spiritual *growth*, with *each* stage / building on the *previous*.
 - i. The *first* stage / is called "the recognition of God."
 - 1. Here, faith *begins*
 - a. with *discovering* God,
 - b. and becoming aware of his *presence* in our lives.
 - 2. Now, for those who've grown up in the *church*,
 - a. it can be hard to know when this *happens*,
 - b. because *faith* / is just in the air all *around* us.
 - 3. But the recognition of God is *basically* when / we *experience* the God of the Bible / to be *real* –
 - a. not just something we're learning *about*, but someone / whom we can talk *to*;
 - b. not just a list of do's and *don'ts*, but someone who *loves* us / and whom we *love*.
 - 4. This *first* stage, then, is the *beginning* stage / of faith.
 - ii. The *second* stage / is called "the life of *discipleship*."
 - 1. The word "*disciple*" / simply means "*follower*" / or "*learner*."
 - 2. And so after faith *begins*, it seeks to learn more *about* that faith.
 - 3. And very often the way to *do* that
 - a. is by finding others who are further *along* in the faith
 - b. to *belong* to / and to learn *from*.
 - 4. This *second* stage, then, is the learning and *belonging* stage of faith.
 - iii. The *third* stage / is called "the *productive* life."
 - 1. After having *come* to faith,
 - a. and after having learned *about* that faith,
 - b. and after having found belonging *within* the faith,
 - 2. people in *this* stage / want to give *back*.
 - a. And so they move from *learning* / to also *teaching*.
 - b. They move from *receiving* / to also *giving*.
 - 3. This *third* stage, then, is the *doing* stage of faith.
 - iv. The *fourth* stage – "the journey *inward*" – marks a *turn*.
 - 1. In the *first* three stages, spiritual growth is propelled primarily by *external* things –
 - a. belonging to a faith *community*,
 - b. learning from *teachers*,
 - c. serving and *activities*.
 - 2. In stage *four*, however,

- a. those external things are still necessary *scaffolds* for building our faith,
 - i. but now our growth *primarily* happens / *internally*...
 - ii. and *especially* / as we work through inner *turmoil*.
 - b. *What* do I mean / by inner *turmoil*?
 - i. Well, it could be *anything*
 - 1. ranging from deep *guilt* / over some *sin* / or deep *shame* / over some *struggle*,
 - 2. to the unprocessed *pain* / of *rejection* / or feeling *unloved* / by certain *people*.
 - ii. It could be the *tension* / of feeling like I'm living a *lie*;
 - iii. or it could be that gnawing *frustration* / of wanting my life to be more than it *is*.
 - c. *However* it might look, there's this *turmoil* / *inside* of us.
- 3. Now,
 - a. this turmoil might have been there for a long *time* / or it may have been more recently *triggered*,
 - b. but there's something *else* that happens at stage four / that makes it a stage of spiritual *growth*: our *faith* / seems to *fail* us.
 - i. The external faith we had been building in stages one, two, and *three*
 - 1. just can't handle the *turmoil* anymore.
 - ii. *Learning* something / or *doing* something / or belonging to some *group*
 - 1. no longer seems to give strength against *sin*
 - 2. or comfort for *pain*
 - 3. or hope for *meaning* anymore.
 - iii. And it *may* be such a struggle / that we even *wonder* / if we still *believe*.
 - c. In this *fourth* stage of spiritual growth, then,
 - i. we come to the *end* of ourselves;
 - ii. internally and *spiritually*, we hit a *wall*.
- 4. But there at the *wall*,
 - a. we are invited to *grow* / in a *new* way –
 - i. not through external learning or belonging or *doing*,
 - ii. but through an *internal* / *surrender*.
 - b. Maybe in *previous* stages
 - i. we've talked about letting *go* / and letting *God*,
 - ii. or giving up *control* to him.
 - c. But there at the *wall*, it *really* / sinks / in:

- i. There *really* is / *nothing* we can do / to get us out of this *turmoil*;
 - ii. we really *do* / have to surrender and *trust* God...
 - iii. and *this* time / not just with our external *circumstances*,
 - iv. but *this* time / with our very *selves*.
 - v. Those who *do* deepen their trust in God like that, though, they make it *through* the wall / and into the *fifth* stage of the "critical journey," which is called "the journey *outward*."
 - 1. Having done the internal work of stage *four*, people in *this* stage
 - a. "venture *outside* of their self-interest / to *others*,
 - b. based on the growth and peace of *mind* they've experienced / from their inner *journey*."
 - 2. Now from the *outside*,
 - a. the learning and doing and belonging of stage *five*
 - b. looks very *similar* / to that of stages two and *three*.
 - 3. But in stage *five*, it's coming from a different *inside*,
 - a. an inside that's been changed through the *process*
 - b. of deeply *surrendering* to God / and *trusting* him.
 - vi. The sixth and *final* stage / is "the life of *love*."
 - 1. And *here*, God's love has soaked into our *bones*, and it's constantly *expressed* / through our actions towards *others*.
 - 2. We're so used to trusting God and surrendering to his *ways* by now / that it's not really a struggle to *choose* that anymore.
 - 3. And in life we can do *great* things / or we can do *everyday* things;
 - a. it doesn't really *matter* to us anymore...
 - b. for what *matters* / is beholding *Jesus*, and being *close* to him.
 - 4. *No* human being is sinless this side of new creation, but at stage *six* / we *reflect* the image of Christ / as much as we *can*.
 - vii. So *these* / are the six *stages*.
- b. Now, a few *comments* to make.
 - i. The *first* / is that this model is diagramed not as a *ladder*, but as a *circle*.
 - 1. This is to show that while spiritual growth *does* progress in stages, those stages do *not* move closer to or further away / from *God*;
 - 2. they are *all* / equally *close* to him.
 - a. In the same way that *children*
 - i. are more mature at two *years* / than at 2 *months*
 - ii. but are *equally* loved by their parents / at *any* age,
 - b. so *Christians*
 - i. at *any* stage of spiritual growth
 - ii. are equally loved by their Father in *heaven*.
 - 3. Now,
 - a. it is *true* / that at times we will *feel* closer to or further away from God;

- b. but that has less to do with what *stage* we're in, and *more* to do
 - i. with what we're *experiencing* in each stage,
 - ii. or whether we're grieving the *Spirit* / through how we're *living*.
 - 4. So *circle*, not *ladder*.
 - ii. *Second*, there's plenty of going back and *forth* / across the middle *stages*.
 - 1. So for *example*, someone experiencing the inner turmoil of stage *four*
 - a. may still regularly *find* themselves
 - b. functioning with the productivity of stage *three*.
 - 2. Or someone who is doing the serving and leading of stage *three*
 - a. may also at times take the *posture*
 - b. of the learner in stage *two*.
 - 3. And *all* of this / is *ok*. It's part of life with *God*.
 - 4. Because going back and forth across *stages*
 - a. is not the same as growing closer to or further away from *God*.
 - b. It's a *circle*, not a *ladder*.
 - iii. Also, *third*, each stage is good and *important* / in its *own* right. There's no *rush* / to get to the next *stage*.
 - 1. So for *example*, those who've grown up in the *church*
 - a. might take longer to *identify* / when they've recognized the reality of *God* in their lives – stage *one*.
 - b. But *then*, because they've grown up in the *church*,
 - i. they're able to move through stage two learning and *belonging*
 - ii. into stage three serving and *doing*
 - iii. quite *readily*.
 - 2. *Contrast* that / to people who are *new* to the church.
 - a. It's perhaps *easier* in that case / to identify entry into stage *one*,
 - b. but it might take *longer* / to step into stage *two*.
 - c. Because – *frankly* – it can be *uncomfortable* joining a new faith community!
 - 3. And *all* of that / is *okay*.
 - a. Spiritual *growth* / goes at a different *pace* / for different *people*.
 - b. And *each* stage / is good and *important* / in its *own right*.
 - c. So *that* / is Hagberg and Guelich's / *six-stage* model. And / some comments *about* it.

- III. What I want to do *now* / is *apply* this model / to *spiritual* formation / at *midlife*.
- a. *Chat*: And just by way of *review*, go ahead / and *open* up your chat screens, and answer this *question*:
- i. What are *key* words / or *ideas* you remember / from *two* weeks ago / when we described what goes on *inside* of us / during *midlife*?
 - ii. What are *key* words / or *ideas* / that describe what goes on *inside* of us / during *midlife*?"
 - iii. And I'll give you a *hint*: it involves *ladders*.
- b. Well, *two* weeks ago, when we *began* our Lenten sermon series, we talked about what can happen inside of us spiritually during *midlife*.
- i. And we said that *at* midlife,
 1. we can experience a *profound* realization / of our own mortality and *limitation*.
 2. We only have so much time left on *earth*!
 - ii. And then *that* / causes us to take *stock* of our lives.
 1. Now for *many*, this taking *stock* / can lead to a deep sense of *disappointment*.
 - a. We look at the ladder of *life* we've been trying to climb –
 - i. whether that's the ladder of career *accomplishment*
 - ii. or building a certain kind of *family*
 - iii. or attaining to a degree of *status* –
 - b. and we *realize* / that we just won't be able to get to the *top*.
 - c. And so we're deeply *disappointed*.
 2. For many *others*, taking *stock* / can lead to a deep *dissatisfaction*.
 - a. We *have* been able to get to the top of our ladders,
 - b. but it's just not as great as we thought it would *be*...
 - c. and *now* what?
 - iii. The result of *either* of these – disappointment or dissatisfaction –
 1. is that we feel *disillusioned* about our lives,
 2. or we feel *disoriented* / about what our lives are *for*.
 3. We may *even* feel trapped / by how our lives have turned *out*.
 - iv. And then what all of this boils *down* to / is inner *turmoil* –
 1. the *kind* of inner turmoil / that causes someone to take the journey *inwards*...
 2. which is stage *four* / of Hagberg and Guelich's *model*.
- c. But there in that journey *inwards*,
- i. many Christian midlifers not only experience *turmoil*,
 - ii. they also *discover* / that the kind of faith they'd been *building* up to that point / just doesn't seem to *work* anymore.
 1. The community we *belong* to / is supposed to *comfort* us,
 - a. but we remain *disappointed*.
 2. The ways we *serve* / are supposed to give us *joy*,
 - a. but we remain *dissatisfied*.

3. The things we've learned and *know* / are supposed to provide a sense of *hope* / and *purpose* – we know what the chief end of *man* is supposed to be –
 - a. but we *continue* to feel / *disillusioned*, *disoriented*, or *trapped*.
4. Even our spiritual *disciplines* now / feel *flat*.
- iii. And so for *many* at midlife, we really *do* come / to the *end* of ourselves.
 1. This stage of life is hard enough as it *is*,
 2. but even *spiritually* / we've hit a *wall*.
- d. But *there* at the wall, what *happens*?
 - i. Well, what *happens* / is we are tempted to *escape* / or start *over* / or just grin and *bear* it.
 - ii. But what *God* invites us to do at the wall / is to grow *spiritually* / in a *new* way –
 1. not just through external *learning* / or *belonging* / or *doing* anymore,
 2. but now *also* / through an internal *surrender*.
- e. A *quick* caveat:
 - i. My *point* here / is not that midlife is the *only* time people enter stage four.
 1. Remember, there's plenty of back and *forth* across the middle stages.
 2. And so we can undergo different *versions* of the wall / at different ages in our *lives*,
 3. with each time *deepening* / our surrender in trust to *God*.
 - ii. My point is *also* not / that everyone *has* to enter stage four at midlife;
 1. remember, every spiritual journey is *different*.
 - iii. My point is *simply* / that a lot of people in midlife *do* enter stage four; so it's worth *talking* about.

IV. And in *particular*, it's worth talking about what it means to *surrender* to God / and *trust* him / at the *wall*.

- a. Our text this *morning* / is the Apostle Paul *writing* about a time in his life / when he *too* hit the wall.
 - i. Maybe it was *during* his midlife years, maybe *not*. More *important* / is what his wall was *like*.
 1. And it *began* / with an external *trigger* – a “*thorn* in the flesh” he calls it / in verse 7.
 2. But very *quickly*, we see how this external trigger *cascades* / into significant inner *turmoil*.
 - a. The thorn doesn't just *hurt*, it *humiliates*.
 - b. It pulls him *down*.
 - c. It keeps him from being too *elated* / about the revelations he's learned and *experienced* / from *God*.
 3. And so in verse 8,

- a. we find Paul *praying* – *pleading*, even – that God would *remove* the thorn.
 - b. But there at the *wall*, his *prayer* life – despite *repeated* attempts – doesn't "*work*" ...
 - i. at *least*, not in the sense of it removing the *thorn*
 - ii. and ending the *turmoil*.
 - 4. And so at the *end* of verse 8, we find *Paul* / at his own personal *wall*.
 - ii. But then *skip* a verse, and we find Paul on the other *side* / a changed *man*.
 - 1. In verse *10*, he is no longer *pleading* with God, but he is *content*.
 - 2. And not content because God finally came through and removed the *thorn*, but *content* / *with* the thorn.
 - 3. Another word for *content*, then, is *accepting*.
 - a. Which, by the way, is *different* / from being *resigned*.
 - i. Being *resigned* / is *passive* / and *impersonal*.
 - ii. But *accepting* / is *active*, *trusting*, and *relational*.
 - b. Paul accepting the *thorn*, then, is him *actively* / *trusting* / *God*.
 - 4. And then on *top* of that, Paul is now *also* accepting / of *insult* / and *hardships* / and *persecutions* / and *calamities*.
 - iii. In *other* words, *whatever* happened to Paul / in that verse we skipped,
 - 1. it not only helped him to surrender to God in trust about the *thorn*;
 - 2. but it *also* changed / his *entire* approach / to *life*.
- b. So *what* is / this *skipped* verse? What is so *important* / that happens in verse 9? God *says* to Paul, "My *grace* / is *sufficient* for you, for my *power* / is made perfect in *weakness*."
 - i. Here, God is *saying* / that he has a *life* for Paul / that is *entirely* / about *grace*. And *that* life / is *sufficient*.
 - ii. You see, the *problem* for Paul in this passage / wasn't actually the *thorn*; it was that Paul was looking at *life* / like it's a *ladder*.
 - 1. When he *received* the great revelations of verse 7, it was him climbing *up* the ladder.
 - 2. But then when he was harassed by the *thorn*, it was him being pulled *down* the ladder.
 - 3. And *that's* why he pleaded with God / to *free* him from the thorn – he didn't want to be pulled *down* anymore.
 - iii. But God *says* to him, "No. I *won't* take out the thorn. Because there's something more *important* / than you living a thorn-free *life*. And it's *this*:
 - 1. I want you to *realize* / that life with *me* / is not a *ladder*.
 - a. Life with *me* / is a *circle*.
 - b. Yes, there *are* stages of growth;
 - c. but *whatever* stage you're in, the *gracious* love / that I *have* for you in my Son / is the *same*.

- i. It cannot *increase*; it cannot *decrease*...
 - ii. because it is *perfect*.
 - 2. So *Paul*, let go of that ladder-mentality.
 - a. Let go of *thinking* / that life is about moving *up*, or being satisfied at the *top*.
 - b. Because life with *me* / is a circle of *grace*.
 - i. And that *grace* / is *sufficient*.
 - ii. You *don't* need / the *ladder* anymore.
 - 3. And once you let go of the *ladder*, then you'll see / how *true* it is / that my *power* / is made perfect in *weakness*.
 - a. You see, people who live by the *ladder* / resist being weak – whether it's the weakness of *thorns* / or anything *else* –
 - i. because *weakness* / is going *down*,
 - ii. and the point of *ladders* / is to climb *up*.
 - b. But people who live by my *grace* / don't *care* about ladders,
 - i. and so they can *accept* weakness,
 - ii. and *understand* / that in *my* hands / they are *actually* means / through which I show my *power*."
 - c. And *this* is what God says to us / who are *at* midlife / and also stuck at the *wall*.
 - i. The *problem* with midlife / is not the *thorn* of our mortality / or the weakness of being *limited*.
 - 1. The *problem* / is that we see *life* / like it's a *ladder*.
 - a. There are things we want to *attain*,
 - i. experiences we want to *accumulate*,
 - ii. *rungs* / we want to *climb*;
 - b. and we've built our joy and purpose and *identity* / around getting to the *top*.
 - 2. But *God* / wants us to see *life* / as a *circle*.
 - a. So that *whether* or not we attain to what we want,
 - b. the most *important* thing to us / is being close to *him*,
 - c. and *that* / is our *joy* / and *purpose* / and *identity*.
 - ii. Now, *life* in the circle of God's *grace* / does *not* mean / that there is no space for happiness or *sorrow*.
 - 1. Certainly, happiness over the *ups* / of getting what we *want*
 - 2. and sorrow about the *downs* / of *loss* / and dashed *dreams* / and wondering whether things will ever *change* –
 - 3. they are *all* / *still* / part of the journey with *God*.
 - iii. But what *life* in the circle of *grace* *does* mean
 - 1. is that the ups and their *happiness* / and also the downs and their *sorrow* –
 - 2. they don't *define* our lives anymore...
 - 3. because our lives are not a *ladder* anymore.

4. *Rather*, our lives are now a *circle* / centered on *God* / and his unchanging *love*.
- iv. And it's as we feel *safe* / in *his* unchanging love, *that's* when
 1. we can be *content* with – and even come to *accept* –
 2. *whatever* plans / our loving God *has* for us...
 3. *even* including / the *downs* / and the *thorns*.
- d. *This* / is God's *invitation* to us.
 - i. That at the *wall* of midlife, we *finally* see / that living life as though it's a *ladder* / just doesn't *work*.
 1. *Shackling* our joy and purpose and identity / to how *high* we can climb / or how happy we think we should be at the *top*
 - a. only leads to *disillusionment*
 - b. and *disorientation*
 - c. and feeling *trapped*.
 2. And so at the *wall*, it finally *hits* us / like a ton of *bricks*: the *ladder* / is not *sufficient*.
 - ii. Which is why God *beckons* us
 1. to let *go* of the ladder –
 - a. to *surrender* our grip from the rungs,
 - b. and to more *fully* / *fall* into the sufficiency / of his *grace*.
 2. Yes, *life* in his grace / will *still* have its ups and downs, but the ups and *downs* / don't *shake* us anymore.
 - a. They simply become a *context*
 - b. for experiencing even more of God's *grace*.
 - iii. In fact, *later* in our lives, when we look *back* on our midlife years,
 1. we will come to *see* / how him growing in us a heart of surrender and *trust* / through the *trials* of midlife –
 2. it was actually his Holy Spirit *making* us / *ever* more like Jesus – who himself at *Gethsemane*, the night before his *crucifixion*,
 - a. *pleaded* with the Father repeatedly / to *remove* the cross from him,
 - b. but then ultimately *surrendered* / in *trust* to the good plans / of his *Father*.
 - iv. If *spiritual* formation / is about the *Holy* Spirit / forming *our* spirits / into the *likeness* of Christ, then *this* is how it can happen / for *us* / at *midlife*.

V. **Conclusion**

- a. *Series*: Now, no *doubt*, there are still many questions to *answer*.
 - i. For example, yes, God invites us to let go of the *ladder*, but what does that actually *look* like?
 1. We'll talk about that *next* week
 2. when we look at a *story* / of midlife spiritual *formation*.

- ii. And *another* question: Apparently it's really important to trust the sufficiency of God's *grace*. But what helps us *do* that? What helps us learn to *trust* / that God's grace is *sufficient* for us?
 - 1. We'll talk about *that* / in the *final* sermon of this series
 - 2. when we look more *comprehensively* / at the *grace* of Jesus / in the *Gospel*.
- b. *Summary*: But *today* what we've seen / is that spiritual *growth* / happens in *stages*.
 - i. And while we can *quibble* / about what's the best *model* for depicting that growth, we know from the *Scriptures* / that spiritual growth *happens*
 - 1. as we experience the reality of *God* in our lives,
 - 2. and as we *learn* / and belong to a community of his *people*,
 - 3. and as we *join* him in his work / through service and *action*.
 - ii. But spiritual growth *also* takes us / deep into our *spirits*.
 - 1. In *fact*, that work of the Holy Spirit forming *our* spirits / into the image of *Christ* / is *necessary*
 - 2. so that our faith *isn't* / just about what we *know* / or what we *do* / or what group we *belong* to,
 - 3. but it's about us being *changed* / by *God* / from the inside *out*.
 - iii. What I like about Hagberg and *Guelich's* model / is that it *tells* us / about stage *four*.
 - 1. It *shows* us
 - a. that when we feel like we've come to the *end* of ourselves – even *spiritually* –
 - b. that is actually *not* the end / of what *God* is doing in us.
 - 2. In *fact*, confronting the wall of our *weakness* / is *precisely* when / God does some of his most *powerful* work / in our *lives*.
- c. *Reflection questions*: Now with *that*, let me close / with a few *reflection* questions:
 - i. First, where do you think *you* are / in the six stages of Hagberg and Guelich's "critical journey"?
 - ii. Second, what do you think is your "ladder"?
 - iii. And then lastly, when have you experienced the "wall" before?
 - 1. If you're at the "wall" now,
 - 2. then what do think God is calling you to surrender with trust in him?

Let's pray together.

APPENDIX F: SERMON NOTES FOR “SPIRITUAL FORMATION AT MIDLIFE: A STORY OF HOW IT HAPPENED”

I. **Intro**

- a. *Series:* This Lent, our sermon series is *focusing* / on the topic of *spiritual* formation / at *midlife*.
 - i. And by *now*, you’ve already heard a *lot* from me
 - 1. about the *definition* of spiritual formation –
 - a. which is the process by which the *Holy* Spirit
 - b. forms *our* spirits / into the image of *Christ* –
 - 2. as well as the *importance* of spiritual formation.
 - ii. You’ve *also* heard a lot from me / about the *turmoil* that can happen / *inside* of us during midlife –
 - 1. including that profound realization of *mortality*,
 - 2. the deep disappointment or dissatisfaction that can *follow*,
 - 3. and then the resulting *disillusionment*, *disorientation*, and feeling *trapped*.
 - iii. And then *last* week, I presented to you a *model* for spiritual formation, showing how someone might grow *spiritually* / in six *stages*.
 - 1. We talked about how the *first* three stages
 - a. consist of recognizing the reality of *God* in our lives,
 - b. and then learning *about* our faith / and belonging to a faith *community*,
 - c. and then serving and giving back to *others* / what *we’ve* learned / and received *ourselves*.
 - 2. We *then* talked / about the *fourth* stage of spiritual growth, which is the inward *journey*.
 - a. And *there*,
 - i. we encounter some kind of inner *turmoil*
 - 1. that the faith we’ve been building in the *first* three stages
 - 2. just can’t *handle*.
 - ii. We hit a spiritual *wall* / and come to the *end* of ourselves.
 - b. Now,
 - i. this *can* happen to us / at *any* point in our lives.
 - ii. And it doesn’t *necessarily* have to happen / in our *midlife* years.
 - c. But for *many* at midlife, it *does* happen.
 - i. That realization of mortality and *limitation*,
 - 1. that disappointment and dissatisfaction
 - 2. and everything else that I just *mentioned* –
 - ii. it can *lead* / to the kind of *inner* turmoil

1. that pushes us to the *end* of ourselves,
2. that can make us *hit* / that spiritual *wall*.
3. But *all* of this / is actually *part* / of the *process*, part of how the *Spirit* / is *growing* us / and *forming* us / into the image of *Christ*.
 - a. For at the *wall* – when we’ve come to the *end* of ourselves –
 - b. the Spirit *beckons* us / to finally *surrender* ourselves in trust to God, and so to *become* / more like *Jesus*...
 - i. who *himself* said to the Father,
 - ii. “yet not *my* will, but *yours* be done.”
4. The *following* stages, then, are the journey back out.
 - a. We re-engage the learning and belonging and serving of *before*,
 - b. but from a different *inner* place –
 - i. a place of greater *trust* in God,
 - ii. and greater *experience* / of his all-sufficient *grace*.
- iv. So *those* are the six stages –
 1. arranged not as a *ladder* / with the final stage somehow being the *closest* to God,
 2. but as a *circle* / with *all* the stages / *equally* close to God.
- v. And *that’s* what we’ve been talking about / since the start of *Lent*.
- b. *Sermon*: Now *this* week,
 - i. I want to share with you a *story* – actually, a *couple* stories – about spiritual formation at *midlife*
 1. in order to help *flesh* out / the model we just *talked* about.
 - ii. So *sure*, surrendering ourselves to the Father with trust in *him* / sounds right in *theory*, but *what* does that actually / *look* like?
 1. *Stories* / can help us answer that *question*.
- c. *Agenda*: So *two* stories.
 - i. *One* / is about a woman named Rose Marie Miller.
 1. She is a *missionary*, *teacher*, and speaker with *Serge*, which is a *missions* agency / based in Jenkintown just *north* of here.
 2. She tells her *story* / in her book, *From Fear to Freedom*.
 - ii. The *second* story / is about a man named *Don*.
 1. And *his* story / is told by Paul Tripp / in his book *Lost in the Middle*.
 2. You’ll get to know more about *Don* / as you hear more of his *story*.
 - iii. I’ll be *telling* their stories / in *parallel*.
 1. Meaning,
 - a. I’ll share a bit about Rose Marie, and then a bit about *Don*;
 - b. and then *more* about Rose Marie, and then more about *Don*;
 - c. and so forth.
 2. And *all* along the way, I’ll be highlighting *key* points / to help us *digest* / everything we’re *hearing*.

- iv. So without *further* ado, the story of *Rose Marie*, and the story of *Don...* in their own *words*.

II. *The inner turmoil*

a. We *begin* / with *Rose Marie*:

- i. "It *started* out innocently enough / *one* afternoon / when a friend and I were having *tea* together / in our sun-filled *living* room.
 - 1. She *commented* casually,
 - a. 'Jim and Ruth's wedding was *lovely*, Rose Marie,
 - b. but it's too bad that you ran out of *food* / before the *wedding* party was served.'
 - 2. I / was / *stunned*.
 - a. My mental world *darkened*....
 - i. I couldn't *shake* / the *intense* feelings / of shame and *guilt*.
 - ii. For *months* / I was *fixated* / on my failure as [the mother of the *bride*].
 - b. Friends had *offered* to provide extra food and drink for the wedding, but confident of my own *planning*, I had *declined* their offers....
 - c. [And then] instead of facing up to this obvious *character* flaw in myself – my presumptuous self-*confidence* –
 - i. I *concluded* / that *God* had let me down....
 - 3. It doesn't surprise me *now* /
 - a. that this *coping* device – ignoring my *own* sins and failures / and blaming *God* *instead* – didn't *work*.
 - b. *Instead*, it only *deepened* my burden of shame / and my *preoccupation* / with the *incident*.
- ii. It also roused *other* feelings of guilt / out of their state of *hibernation*, feelings that I had *unconsciously* / *suppressed*.
 - 1. *These* feelings / related to my dear *father*."
 - 2. *Abridgment*: And then Rose Marie *talks* about
 - a. how important a *person* her dad was in her life;
 - b. but how the morning he *died*,
 - i. her sister had told her that dad was *sick*,
 - ii. but instead of going up to *check* on him, she took a shower *instead*.
 - c. *After* the shower, she goes to *check* on him, and *discovers*
 - i. that he had died of a *massive* stroke
 - ii. *while* / she was in the *shower*.
 - 3. She talks about the overwhelming *guilt* she felt for that, but how she did not *process* it:
 - a. "I thought I was *strong* enough to handle my loss and guilt.

- b. [And] for a time I *was*, but my failure at Ruth's *wedding* / *unleashed* these old feelings / of unresolved *guilt*.
 - iii. As this sense of *shame* / came *crashing* down on me, even I could see / that I was having some kind of emotional *crisis* – a *midlife* / *passage*."
- b. *Now*, we turn / to *Don's* story.
 - i. "Something was *wrong* with me / that I did not *understand* / and could not *escape*.
 - 1. I spent that year being *interviewed*, *inspected*, *poked*, and *evaluated* / by doctor after *doctor*....
 - 2. *Finally* / I found myself in the *office* / of a *neurologist*.... I had / multiple *sclerosis*.
 - 3. *MS!* I had *MS!*... a *life*-altering / *neurological* disease / for which there was no *cure*.
 - 4. This couldn't be *happening!*... Not *this*, not *now!*...
 - ii. *Soon*, however, with the wonders of modern *medicine*, things went back to *normal*....
 - 1. Except for [some *limitations*], life was pretty much the same as *before* my diagnosis.
 - 2. *All* of my dreams / were still *attainable*....
 - a. I was getting lots of *support* / and encouragement at *work*, and it was all very *exciting*....
 - b. I had risen to the *top* / because I had tried to employ biblical *principles* / in my leadership of the people at *work*.
 - c. God seemed to be *honoring* / the principles of his *Word* / and blessing my *efforts*....
 - 3. Sure, I was *sick*, but life was *good* / and *all* of my dreams / were still *fully* / in *place*....
 - iii. [Several years *later*, however,] I went in for a routine *MRI*. The news was *devastating*: I had a *hole* / in the base of my *spine*....
 - 1. [And *now*,] it seemed like I was *looking* / at the end of my wonderful *world*....
 - a. *This* news / hit me much *harder* than my original diagnosis.
 - b. *This* one / seemed to be the *deal* breaker.
 - 2. Because of my *career* fears, I *hid* the truth from the people around me who could end my career, yet I was crying *out* / *inside*....
 - a. I think I *suffered* during this time / more from the *stress* of it all / than directly from the *disease*.
 - b. I *needed* / to keep the dream *going*....
 - 3. [But] things were the *worst* they had ever been at work....
 - a. I found myself asking God for *forgiveness* / for the ways I [was cutting *corners*.]
 - b. On more than *one* occasion / I *seriously* stretched the truth.

- c. I found myself *struggling* / with *practical* issues of faith – trying to keep God and *his* way / *first*.
 - 4. I *finally* knew / I had to be *honest* / with my boss....
 - iv. [This *all*] / *rocked* my faith / more than I thought was *possible*.
 - 1. My *dream* / had become my *idol*,
 - 2. my *job* / was my way of *getting* it,
 - 3. and the *whole* thing / was based on my *assumption* / that my physical health would remain *okay*.
 - 4. I was in the *middle* of my life / and though I didn't *know* it, I had lost my *way*."
- c. *Highlights*:
 - i. Rose Marie's and Don's experiences of midlife / are in *some* ways / very *different*.
 - 1. Rose Marie's trigger event / was a kind of social *failure*,
 - 2. while Don's / was the onset of a medical *condition*.
 - ii. But for *both* of them, their *triggers* / led to a *similar* / and *significant* / inner *turmoil*.
 - 1. For Rose Marie, her view of herself *crumbled*.
 - a. She had *seen* herself / as someone who is *capable* / and in *control*.
 - b. Yet upon reflection on that *wedding* day – and more *deeply*, on the day her father *died* –
 - i. she found herself *incapable*
 - ii. and *not* in control.
 - 2. For Don, his view of himself *also* crumbled.
 - a. He had seen himself as a *breadwinner*, as a rising *star* in his career, even as a godly *witness* / in his *workplace*.
 - b. Yet when that hole in his *spine* was discovered, *all* of that / started falling *apart*.
 - iii. At *this* point in their stories, for *both* of them, their midlife *experience* / was one of deep inner *turmoil*,
 - 1. characterized by *disappointment* / and *disorientation*,
 - 2. maybe even feeling *disillusioned* / about *themselves* / and their *future*.

III. *The wall*

- a. Now back / to Rose Marie's story:
 - i. "I did not see that [my] *crisis* / had its roots in a deeper *faith* problem.
 - 1. I did not *realize* / that the confidence I had always *had* about my life
 - a. was not *faith*, as I had assumed,
 - b. but a reliance on my own *competency*, be it real or *imagined*.
 - 2. [And so] when my competency was called into *question* / by my failures in life's momentous *events*...
 - a. my *confidence* – and the world it *supported* –

- b. began to *crumble*.
 - 3. And *yet*, because I thought I was living by *faith*, I did not understand what was *happening*."
 - ii. And *then* she explains / what was actually *happening*:
 - 1. Faith and presumption look *alike* / because both qualities are characterized by *confidence*,
 - 2. but *faith* / begins in the recognition and *acceptance* / of our total human *weakness*.
 - a. It relies solely on *God*
 - b. and his gracious willingness to *empower* us.
 - 3. *Presumption*, on the other hand, is a reliance on *human* moral abilities / and religious *accomplishments*, on visible *securities*.
 - a. It ultimately relies on *human* will power
 - b. to serve God and people.
 - 4. [And] in *my* case, I was unknowingly *relying* on... past *successes*, or my own *abilities*....
 - iii. How does God *deal* with such a sin pattern in his children?
 - 1. *First*, he must *expose* it.
 - a. What does presumptive faith *depend* on for its existence?
 - i. It must have positive *circumstances* / and feelings of *success*
 - ii. based on visible *accomplishments*.
 - b. So when God wants to *reach* us,
 - i. he must take *away* those favorable circumstances and accomplishments.
 - ii. He hits *hard* / at our false *trusts*.
 - 2. [But when] our confidence in ourselves is shaken by life *changes*, we fight *back*.
 - a. We *increase* our demands upon our 'strengths,'
 - b. be they inner *qualities*, outer *achievements*, or other *people*.
 - 3. But only *emptiness* / *follows*....
 - iv. *Today* I can see
 - 1. that the *root* of my problem
 - a. was that... I was actively resisting *grace* / and its implications for the way I lived my *life*,
 - b. but I did not *know* it.
 - 2. So God left me *alone*, so to speak,
 - a. that the revelation of my *insufficiency*
 - b. would *also* show me / *God's* / *sufficiency*."
- b. And now back to *Don's* story.
 - i. It was a [*time*] / of spiritual *struggle* / and personal *crisis*.... I don't know how else to *say* it,
 - 1. but I was not the same *man* that I had been....

2. My heart was not in the same *place* it once was.
3. My relationship with *God* had not stayed in the same place.
- ii. But it had all been *masked* / by my continuing participation in the things that sincere Christians *do*.
 1. I didn't quit going to *church*. I didn't resign as an *elder*. I continued to be *involved* in ministry,
 2. *but...* [without] any conscious decision to *forsake* him, I was actually *far* from God....
 - a. I thought that all that I was doing was for the *Lord*.
 - i. I thought I was demonstrating every *day*
 - ii. that God could get me *through*, no matter *what*,
 - b. but it was *really* / all about *me*.
 3. I was *confronted* / with my *pride* / in my own *life*....
 - a. God began to use [my *crisis*]
 - b. to reveal the *idolatry* / of my *heart*."
- c. *Highlights*:
 - i. *Again*, Rose Marie and *Don* / have very *different* / midlife *stories*. But what we notice in *this* part of their stories
 1. is that *both* of them
 2. hit a very *similar* / spiritual *wall*.
 - ii. Both of them *realize*
 1. that the faith they had been building up *until* that point
 2. wasn't a faith *strong* enough / to handle their inner *turmoil*.
 - iii. And it's because for *both* of them, their faith in *God* / had *devolved* / into a faith in *themselves*.
 1. Rose Marie calls it a *presumptive* faith; Don calls it *pride*;
 2. either *way*, it's a *reliance*
 - a. on one's *own* strength and abilities and agenda,
 - b. and not on *God*.
 3. And that's why *that* kind of faith / can't handle the *turmoil* –
 - a. because while *God* is strong enough,
 - b. *we* / are *not*.
 - iv. Now *interestingly*, for *both* of them,
 1. the *devolution* of their faith / wasn't something they were fully *aware* of / until they hit their spiritual *walls*.
 2. But there at the *wall*, they come to see their *idols*.
 3. More *importantly*, however, they *also* come to realize
 - a. that God actually hadn't *left* them,
 - b. but he was in fact *doing* something / important *inside* of them.

IV. *The surrender and trust*

- a. Now *one* more time, back to Rose Marie's story.

- i. *Abridgment*: And *here* we fast forward / to a time *after* the wedding / when she and Jack were in *Switzerland* / for a *conference*.
 - 1. And *one* day, she decides to go *skiing* / up in the *Alps*.
 - a. The *problem* / was that she had chosen a *course* / that was way above her *class*.
 - b. But then when she found that *out*, it did not *occur* to her / to just go back down the way she had come *up*.
 - c. *So* / she just pushed *off*...
 - i. and then *fell*, and then got back *up*,
 - ii. *skied* a bit more, then fell *again*...
 - d. *over* and over again / until she decided to try *walking*... but *then* / she was just knee-deep in *snow*.
 - 2. She *finally* makes it back to the hotel / *wet* and weary, and *once* again / angry at *God*:
 - a. "Why did you let me go up that mountain
 - b. when you *knew* / what it would *be* like?"
- ii. And *then* she tells us / what happens the next *Sunday*, when they're taking *communion*:
 - 1. "As the loaf of French bread was *broken*, it gave a *crack*. [And *that's* when] / I saw with *new* eyes
 - a. the spear of the *soldiers*
 - b. *breaking* the body of Christ / for my *sins*.
 - 2. My *own* heart broke / as I remembered the *ski* incident / of a few days *before*.
 - a. It was as if God were *saying* to me,
 - i. "Rose Marie, your whole *life* / is like your slide down that *mountain*.
 - ii. You are full of *presumption*, self-*righteousness*, and *pride*.
 - iii. I let you go *up* there / to *show* you / about *yourself*."
 - b. There was no audible *voice* saying these words, but they were *there*, and directed at my *heart*.
- iii. The *Father* / had opened my eyes to *grace*... But it was a most *painful* encounter....
 - 1. I now *realized* / how many times I had blamed God and *others* for the hard things in my life.
 - a. I could *see* / that my problem at Ruth's *wedding* / had been caused by my *pride*.
 - i. A proud self-*sufficiency* had kept me
 - ii. from accepting the *offers* from others to help with the food.
 - b. [And] I saw *clearly*

- i. that when my pride and self-righteousness got me into a *mess*, my natural *reaction* / had been to blame *God*....
 - ii. But *here* / I was caught by my own *conscience*.
 - iii. All the decisions to go *up* the mountain / and ski *down* / were my *own*.
 - iv. Why didn't it *occur* to me / to go down the way I came *up*? Well, that's how I live my *life*.
 - 1. I was my own *leader*;
 - 2. I followed my own *wisdom*,
 - 3. relied on my own *strength*....
 - 2. But I had *now*
 - a. brought *real* sins – including my *attitudes* / of self-*dependence* / and *blame*-shifting – to a real *Savior*,
 - b. and they had been *forgiven*....
- iv. On that *ski* slope / sin was *exposed* – my *proud*, independent *spirit* – [but] at the Lord's *Table* / I saw the *meaning* / of Christ's *death*.
 - 1. I was surprised by *grace*: *undeserved*, yet freely *given*.
 - 2. It *came* to me / with almost *burning* certainty / that he *loved* me / and *died* for me."
- b. And now *finally*, Don's story, *one* last time:
 - i. "God was doing *more* / than revealing the depth of my *idolatry* [however]; he was *revealing* / *himself* to me....
 - ii. *Still*, with all the insight that God was *giving* me / and with the ability to see his *presence* in my life, it was *not* easy.
 - 1. I was faced with some of the *hardest* decisions of my life
 - a. which not only altered *my* life
 - b. but also the lives of my wife and my three *boys*.
 - 2. I could see God's *hand* in it all, but I had no *vision* / for what was on the other *side*....
 - a. I could no longer finance my *dreams*,
 - b. and I was no longer the *productive* / and successful *person* / that I loved *being*....
 - iii. But through the *ministry* / of brothers in the body of *Christ*, God was beginning to *build* / a *new* vision in my heart."
 - 1. *Abridgment*: And then Don goes on to *talk* about
 - 2. new ministries that he started to *engage* in –
 - a. ministries of *mentorship*, *encouragement*, *discipleship*;
 - b. sitting on a *board* / for a missionary *foundation*;
 - c. even *consulting* / for his old *company*.
 - iv. But the *final* point Don wants to make / is *this*:
 - 1. "I *now* know / that my midlife *crisis* / was not the *end*.
 - a. I had gotten *lost* in the middle,
 - b. but by God's great *grace* / I was not lost for *long*.
 - 2. The *crisis* / was actually a *rescue*

- a. from the *bondage* to something
 - b. that I *didn't* even know / had that kind of *hold* on me.
 - 3. And it wasn't just a *rescue*; it was a *welcome* / to a brand new *start....*
 - 4. I don't know what my physical future *holds*, but I *do* know
 - a. that I am God's *child*,
 - b. that he is *with* me / *every* moment,
 - c. and that his *grace* / is greater than *any* weakness or disappointment / I will *ever* / *face*."
- c. *Highlights*: Do you hear the common *themes* / of Rose Marie's and Don's *stories*?
 - i. There's the *theme* / of finally seeing their deeper *sin* issues.
 - 1. Not just wrong choices here and *there* / or bad behaviors once in a *while*,
 - 2. but a deeply engrained *attitude*
 - a. of *pride* / and self-sufficiency,
 - b. of looking to *themselves* / and their own *efforts* / to sustain their sense of *joy* / or *purpose* / or *identity*.
 - 3. Both Rose Marie and *Don* – in their *midlife* years –
 - a. came to *acknowledge* their idolatry
 - b. and so were able to finally *confess* / and *repent* of it.
 - ii. There's *also* the theme / of a profound experience of God's *grace* / that comes through *suffering*.
 - 1. Both Rose Marie and *Don* / talk about how *painful* the process was for them –
 - a. the death of their idolatrous *dreams*,
 - b. the crumbling of their idolatrous sense of *self*.
 - 2. And *yet*, it was *precisely* there in that pain / that they *experienced* / the *all-sufficient* grace / of *God*.

V. **Conclusion**

- a. So what does it *look* like / to *surrender* ourselves to God / with *trust* in him?
 - i. It *looks* like / a *story*.
 - 1. For Rose Marie, it is *her* story. For *Don*, it is *his* story. And for *you*, it will be *your* story.
 - 2. But this is how the story will *go*:
 - a. It will *involve* / what 1 Peter chapter 1 verse 6 *calls* / "*various trials*."
 - i. Maybe failing to do something at a *wedding*.
 - ii. Maybe a bad *doctor's* visit.
 - iii. Maybe something *else*.
 - b. But *whatever* it is, you will be *grieved* by it, as Peter writes also in verse 6.

- i. There will be a depth of inner *turmoil* / that will *outstrip* / your ability to *handle* it.
 - ii. You'll hit a spiritual *wall*.
 - c. But *then* what happens?
 - i. What *happens* / is the Holy Spirit will *use* the trials and the grief
 - 1. to form your *spirit*,
 - 2. to *refine* / your *faith*.
 - ii. The translation of verse 7 we read *earlier* today says, "*tested* / *genuineness* / of your *faith*,"
 - iii. but the underlying *imagery* that Peter is using / is that of *gold* / being *refined* / through a *heating* process.
 - 1. The fire burns away the *dross*
 - 2. and leaves only what is *pure* / and *untainted*.
- 3. *That* is the story / of what God is doing to *our* faith / through the trials and turmoil of *midlife*.
 - a. He is using the *heat*
 - i. of all our *disappointments* / and *dissatisfactions*
 - ii. and *disillusionment* / and *disorientation* / and feeling *trapped*
 - b. to expose the *idols* / that have *intermixed* / with our faith in *God*.
 - c. And his *goal* / is to burn *away* the dross, is for us to *repent*
 - i. of *all* these other things we may have trusted –
 - ii. our sense of *control*, our *abilities*, our *wisdom* –
 - d. so that what comes *out* of the fires of midlife / is a *tested* / and *genuine* / *faith*.
- 4. And that *faith* – my friends – is more *precious* than gold. *Why*?
 - a. Because *such* faith / will be *found* to result – we read at the end of verse 7 –
 - b. in *praise* and glory and honor / at the *revelation* / of Jesus *Christ*.
- ii. Now contrast *this* story – *God's* story – with the story we typically *choose* for ourselves.
 - 1. *God's* story
 - a. is about letting us go *through* various trials and griefs
 - b. to *expose* the limitations and failures of our sins and idols
 - c. in order to refine our *faith*
 - d. to the praise and glory of *Jesus*.
 - 2. But *our* story – the story we *cling* to anyway –
 - a. is about us *avoiding* trials and griefs;
 - b. it's about our idols *working* for us, and not *failing* us;

- c. and *sure*, while a refined faith to the praise and glory of Jesus might be *nice*,
 - d. *honestly* / we'd rather just achieve our *dreams* / and get what we *want*.
 - iii. And *now* do you see / what surrender *looks* like?
 - 1. The word "*surrender*" / only makes sense in the context of *conflict*.
 - a. And the conflict we have with *God* / that requires our *surrender*
 - b. is a conflict of *stories*: *Whose* story / will we *live* by? *Ours* / or *God's*?
 - 2. To cling to *our* story
 - a. is to do everything we *can* – even *sin* – in order to avoid trial and *grief*,
 - b. is to fall into *despair* / when our idols don't *work* for us,
 - c. is to cry out at the *unfairness* of it all / when we don't get what we *want*.
 - 3. But to surrender in trust to *God's* story
 - a. is to let *go* of that story we cling to,
 - b. and *even* – as Peter writes in verse 6 – *rejoice* / at what God is *doing*.
 - 4. Now,
 - a. this does *not* mean / that we need to simply *resign* ourselves / to the difficulties of our *lives*.
 - b. *Nor* does it mean / that we need to call suffering *good*. Suffering is *not* good.
 - c. But it *is* / *redeemable*.
 - iv. Surrendering with trust in *God*, then, means that we can *receive* trials and griefs / as a way in which God / is *refining* our faith / to the praise of his *Son*.
 - 1. That's what God did through Rose Marie's sense of *failure* / and internal *crisis*.
 - 2. That's what God *did* / through Don's *medical* condition.
- b. Now how about *us*?
 - i. What might be the trials and *griefs* – even our *midlife* trials and griefs – that God *allows* into our lives?
 - ii. And *now* the question: Will we *trust* / that even in the *midst* of our suffering, God is actually being *gracious* to us,
 - 1. even using our momentary *affliction*
 - 2. to *prepare* us / for eternal *glory*?
 - iii. There are a *lot* of ways / that the Holy Spirit can *form* our spirits / into the image of *Christ*. But during our *midlife* years, this is one of the *prime* ways:
 - 1. We learn how to *surrender* our lives and our stories / in *trust* to God,
 - a. the same way that *Jesus* did / during his life here on *earth*.
 - 2. For *he* endured the cross / for the sake of the joy set *before* him.

- a. And so we *too* can endure the trials and griefs of our lives,
 - b. looking *forward* to the joy
 - i. of discovering how he *redeems* them
 - ii. for *our* good / and for his *glory*.
- c. Next week / is our *final* sermon of the series,
 - i. and that's when we'll focus more *comprehensively*
 - ii. on how the *Gospel* of grace / *specifically* ministers / to our midlife *struggles*.
- d. *Reflection questions*: But for *now*, let me leave you with a couple *reflection* questions.
 - i. First,
 - 1. when life gets *stressful*, what do you *resort* to / in order to *cope*?
 - 2. Or when you *really* need something to happen, what do you *resort* to / in order to make it *happen*?
 - 3. And then, could that be an *idol*?
 - ii. And then *second*, be *honest*:
 - 1. Do you believe that the *hard* things of your life / are actually means by which God is refining your *faith*?
 - 2. And how do you *feel* about that?
 - a. Does it feel *worth* it? Does that give you *joy*?
 - b. Or not so *much*?
 - iii. *Two* reflection questions / as we *head* into the week.

Let's pray together.

APPENDIX G: SERMON NOTES FOR “SPIRITUAL FORMATION AT MIDLIFE: APPLYING THE GOSPEL”

I. Intro

- a. *Hook*: Friends, what is the *Gospel*? The *Gospel* / is the *good news* / that the kingdom of God is *here*! *Yes. Now. Here.*
 - i. And the reason we know this is *true* / is because *two thousand years* ago, the *king* of God’s kingdom / was born into our *world*.
 - ii. And *oh* what a wonderful king / Jesus has proven himself to *be*!
 - 1. For *wherever* he went,
 - a. there was *healing* / and *restoration*, there was *forgiveness* / and *life*, and there was standing up against *injustice* / and *dark forces*.
 - b. Jesus fed the *hungry*, gave sight to the *blind*, freed the lame to leap with *joy*, and *listened* / to the stories of suffering *people*.
 - 2. But it’s not just what Jesus *did*; it’s *also* / his very *character*:
 - a. *Perfectly* hating the sin, and yet perfectly *loving* / the *sinner*.
 - b. *Perfectly* righteous / in union with his *Father*, but never even a *hint* / of arrogance *about* it.
 - 3. And *then*, of course, there was the *cross*.
 - a. Though Jesus is *King*, he came not to *be* served, but to *serve* / and to become a ransom for *many*.
 - b. He voluntarily *surrendered* his life, trusting in the Father’s *plan* / that through his *sacrifice*,
 - i. our sins could be *atoned* for / and *forgiven*,
 - ii. and then *we* / could be restored back to *God*.
 - c. That *root* problem
 - i. of *all* our sadness and suffering, of *all* the injustice and evil, of *all* the tears and pain of our world –
 - ii. *namely*, our alienation from *God* –
 - iii. it could *finally* / *begin* to be / *dismantled*.
 - 4. *Friends*, *this* is the King we have. And this is why his *Gospel* / is such good *news*!
 - a. Because the Kingdom of *God* has come,
 - b. and the *King* of that kingdom
 - i. is not some mean *bully* / who’s only in it for *himself*,
 - ii. but he is our *wonderful* / *Lord* / *Jesus* –
 - 1. glorious not only in his *truth*,
 - 2. but also his *grace*!

- iii. What's *more*, it's not just that our King is true and *gracious*, but he is *also* / strong and *mighty*!
 - 1. For three days after his *crucifixion*, he *rose* again! And in the *power* of his resurrection,
 - a. he defeated *death*, opened up *heaven*,
 - b. and made a way for *all* who follow him / to be raised with him *there*.
 - 2. And then *one* day in our future,
 - a. our King will *return*.
 - i. And he will *complete* the work he began.
 - ii. He will *finally* / and *fully* / *establish* his Kingdom.
 - b. And *that's* when / every *sickness* will be healed, and every *sin* will be forgiven, and every *injustice* / will be *undone*.
 - iv. *This* / is the *Gospel*! This is the good *news*!
 - 1. The kingdom of God has *come*! It is *here*, right *now*, in our *world*!
 - 2. And the *King* of this kingdom / is *none* other / than our *true* and *gracious*, our *strong* and *mighty* / Lord *Jesus*.
 - b. *Series*: This *Lent*, our sermon series has been on the *topic* / of spiritual formation at *midlife*. And over the past several *weeks*, we've talked a *lot* about this topic.
 - i. We've defined what spiritual formation *is* / and why it's *important*.
 - ii. We've talked through the dynamics of midlife inner *turmoil*, and even diagramed it *out*.
 - iii. We've looked at a six-stage *model* / for how spiritual growth *happens*, and saw where midlife might fit *in*.
 - iv. We've even listened to a couple *stories* / of what spiritual formation can *look* like / in the midlife *years*.
 - c. *Sermon*: Now *this* week, we come to the *last* sermon in the series.
 - i. And what I want us to do *today*
 - 1. is *still* have the diagrams and the models and the stories in the back of our minds,
 - 2. but bring to the *forefront* / the good news of the *Gospel*.
 - ii. What does the *present* / and *coming* Kingdom of God / have to do with *midlife*?
 - d. *Polling*: Now, there's a *lot* I could say here. But we only have a limited amount of *time*. So *today*, we're *going* to have / a *choose-your-own-adventure* sermon.
 - i. I'm going to open up a *Zoom* poll.
 - 1. And *on* the poll, you'll see that there are *four* topics / from which you can *choose*. *Vote* for the topic / that interests you *most*.
 - 2. And then when most of you have *responded*, we'll see what the *majority* / have chosen for the first main *point*.
 - 3. And then after I *preach* that main point, I'll open the poll *again*, and you guys can *vote* again / for the *second* main point.
 - ii. The *third* main point / is already *preset*.
 - iii. Alright, let me open up the poll *now*, and you guys can *vote* / on what my first main point will *be*! *Conduct poll for first main point*

II. **Topic 1: The Gospel and midlife limitation**

- a. One of the defining struggles of midlife that we've talked about / is the *profound* realization / of being *limited*.
 - i. There's the *realization*, of course, of being limited by *death*: we won't live *forever*; our time on earth is *limited*.
 - ii. But there are *other* forms of limitation / that hit us profoundly at midlife as *well*.
 - 1. For *example*, there's the limitation of our aging *bodies*.
 - a. And while there are certainly good choices we can *make* / to steward our bodies *well*,
 - b. the *fact* is / that this side of the *resurrection*, there is no *cure* / for our bodies falling *apart*.
 - 2. And *then* / there is the limitation of our past *choices*.
 - a. There are *decisions* we've made / that have *lasting* ramifications / that limit us *today*.
 - b. There are things we can't do in the *present* / because of things we've done in the *past*.
 - 3. And one *last* limitation to mention / is just the fact that we can't *control* everything.
 - a. We have *dreams* / we can't make *happen*.
 - b. We have *problems* / we can't *solve*.
 - iii. And so for *many* at midlife, the realization of our *limitation* / all comes to a *head*:
 - 1. our *time* is limited, our *health* is limited, our previous *choices* limit us, and the circumstances of *life* limit us.
 - 2. And *about* all this, we can get *frustrated* / or *bitter* / or *hopeless* / or *desperate* / or feel *trapped*.
- b. But *what* does / the *Gospel* say to this? *Here's* what the Gospel says:
 - i. The *King* of the kingdom / is *Jesus*, not *you*.
 - 1. *He* is the one / who is *limitless*,
 - 2. and so *we* / *can't* be.
 - ii. And in *fact*, human beings were *never* meant to be limitless.
 - 1. Even before the *Fall*, Adam and Eve were bound by space and *time*.
 - 2. And even in the *resurrection* – when the limitations of death and aging will be done *away* with –
 - a. we will *still* / not be all-knowing / or all-powerful / as *Jesus* is.
 - b. We will *still* / have *limits*...
 - 3. and this is not a *defect*, but a *feature*.

- c. So how is it good *news* / that we will *never* stop being limited?
 - i. Well, *one*,
 - 1. Jesus is far better than we are,
 - 2. so it's a really *good* thing / that *he's* the one who's limitless / and not *us*!
 - ii. But then *second*, us being *limited* / is actually for our *joy*. How *so*?
 - 1. There have been *studies* that show / that when you give people *too* many choices,
 - a. it actually lowers their *joy* in making a selection
 - b. than if you were to *limit* their choices.
 - 2. And you've felt this *yourself*, when you go *grocery* shopping / and you have to choose between 24 different types of peanut butter.
 - a. *Sometimes* / it can be *paralyzing*.
 - b. Or you make a *purchase*, and then you have *buyer's* remorse: Did I make the right *choice*?
 - iii. Here's my *point*:
 - 1. *Those* who go through life
 - a. *expecting* / that they should be able to get *whatever* they want / and have no *limits* / on what they can *choose* –
 - b. they will have a harder time *enjoying* / what they actually *have*.
 - 2. But those who go through life *accepting* the fact / that we are *meant* to be limited –
 - a. meaning, we're not *meant* to be able to choose whatever we want –
 - b. *they* are the ones / who will be most *grateful* / and happy with what they *do* have.
 - 3. It's like that *grocery* store.
 - a. If God were to take away *all* our limits / and open up *every* option for us,
 - b. I don't think we would actually be *happier*.
 - 4. But *instead*, God *did* make us with limitation,
 - a. and his *goal* / is for us to cultivate a *joy* / that can withstand even *not* getting what we want.
 - b. And *that* / is a resilient *joy*!
- d. So *that's* what the Gospel says / to midlife *limitation*. Conduct poll for second main point?

III. Topic 2: The Gospel and midlife regret

- a. Many at midlife / struggle with *regret*. And while regret is not *unique* to midlife, there are some unique *features*.
 - i. For *one*, people at midlife / have lived long enough to make *choices* / that significantly impact the rest of their *lives* –
 - 1. for example, *marriage* choices, *career* choices, *parenting* choices,
 - 2. and so forth.
 - ii. What's *more*, people at midlife / are in greater areas of *responsibility* / and *authority*, and so poor choices tend to have greater *consequences* / and *ramifications*.
 - 1. An 8 year old
 - a. saying something offensive in 3rd *grade*
 - b. will experience only *light* / and temporary *consequences*.
 - 2. But a 48 year old
 - a. saying something offensive in a *business* meeting
 - b. is likely to be met with far *heavier* / and more *permanent* consequences.
 - iii. And then *finally*, people at *midlife* / have lived *long* enough / to experience the actual *consequences* of choices they regret.
 - 1. When I was in my early 20s, I tore a muscle in my *back*.
 - a. And back *then*, I just shrugged it *off*, and didn't get it taken *care* of.
 - b. But now in my 40s / I *regret* that.
 - 2. I'm sure many of us can think of *other* examples –
 - a. choices we've made in the *past* / that didn't seem to be that big of a *deal*,
 - b. but now we *realize* / *are* a big deal... and so we *regret* them.
- b. So *what* does / the Gospel say to midlife regret? *This* is what the Gospel says:
 - i. In *Christ*, you are a new *creation*! In *Christ*, you have a new *self*! Your *identity* / is now in *him*; and he is *holy*; which means that *you* are holy.
 - 1. *Regret* is the voice / that says, "My life is *ruined*!"
 - a. It tries to *shrink* who you are
 - b. to that bad choice you *made*, or that bad thing that *happened*.
 - 2. But the Gospel *interrupts* that lie / and tells you that while sin and suffering are *real*, even *more* real / is the Kingdom of God...
 - a. and *you* / are a *citizen* of that kingdom!
 - b. And *nothing* –
 - i. not the bad things you've *done* / or the bad things done *to* you –
 - ii. can *change* that / or *overshadow* that.
 - c. Because our king is *good*, and he is *mighty*!

- ii. And because our regrets don't *define* us anymore, and because it doesn't *scare* us anymore / to see our own *darkness* / or our own *doubts* / or our own *character* flaws, and because what's *really* important – meaning, who we really *are* – is safe with *Jesus*,
 - 1. what we can do *now*
 - a. is the really deep work of *confession*,
 - b. and so we *receive* / the really deep *healing* / of *forgiveness*;
 - 2. what we can do *now*
 - a. is confess to people we've *hurt*,
 - b. and own up to how we contributed to our *conflict* with them,
 - c. and then ask for *their* forgiveness;
 - 3. and what we can do *now*
 - a. is even forgive *others* – if not for *their* sake, then at least for *ours*.
 - b. For in forgiving *others* / for how they've *hurt* us, we actually *free* ourselves
 - i. from the prison of *bitterness*,
 - ii. from constantly *ruminating* / on the wrong *done* to us.
- iii. When *sin* is the reason for regret – whether that be our sin against *others*, or other's sins against *us* –
 - 1. *forgiveness* / is the *balm*! *Forgiveness* / is the medicine we *need*.
 - 2. And the hands of the *King* / are *healing* hands.
- c. *But* / not *all* regret / has to do with *sin*.
 - i. *Sometimes* / it's just a *choice* we made / that has *consequences* / that we now wish didn't *happen*.
 - 1. You thought it was the right thing to *do*,
 - 2. but it *turns* out / it *wasn't*.
 - ii. And what the Gospel says to *that* / is remember your *King*.
 - 1. Your *King* is the one / who gave his life as a ransom for *many*.
 - a. And so if *anyone* has reason to regret a choice that was made,
 - b. surely it was *Jesus* / as he *cried* out on the cross, "My *God*, my *God*, why have you *forsaken* me?"
 - 2. What this *means* / is that when Jesus looks at *our* regret, he does not *dismiss* our second-guessing / or our *grief*.
 - a. *All* of that / is *real*;
 - b. as real as the *consequences* / of his *own* choices.

3. But he also *reminds* us / that wallowing in *regret* / doesn't *help* anything.
 - a. For even *Jesus* – as *powerful* as he is –
 - i. even *he* / does not try to *turn* back time / to make a different *choice*;
 - ii. and so *certainly* / we can't.
 - b. *Wallowing* in regret
 - i. does nothing to *change* the past;
 - ii. it can *only* / poison the *future*.
 - c. Far *better*, then,
 - i. is to give our regrets to *Jesus*,
 - ii. and *rest* in the fact / that *he* is in control,
 - iii. and then *look* forward / in *hope*.
 - d. For our *Jesus*
 - i. was able to take even the *worst* consequence of a choice ever –
 1. *namely*, his death on a cross
 2. as the object of God's *wrath* –
 - ii. and *still* turn it / into the very *means* / of our great *salvation*.
- iii. And so the Gospel *reminds* us – even in the throes of *all* of our regret –
 1. that our lives are *not* ruined, our lives are *not* reduced to whatever bad things happened;
 2. but our lives are *safe* / in the *healing* hands / of our great and gracious *King*.
- d. What the *Gospel* says / to midlife *regret*. Conduct poll for second main point?

IV. **Topic 3: The Gospel and midlife dissatisfaction**

- a. Some people at midlife / *struggle* / with *dissatisfaction*.
 - i. What I have in *mind* here
 - 1. are those people who have gotten to the *top* / of whatever ladder they've always wanted to *climb*.
 - a. They wrote down in *high school* / what they wanted to *do* with their lives.
 - b. And by *midlife*, they've *done* it. They've had that *career* success, that *family* size, that range of life *experiences*.
 - 2. But there at the *top*, they *realize* / they're not as happy or satisfied as they *thought* they would be.
 - a. Maybe there was a rush for a little *while*,
 - b. but it's now *dissipated*,
 - c. and what's *left* / is just this feeling / of *staleness*.
 - ii. And then on *top* of that, they feel *guilty* about this. They *say* to themselves, "Why am I so *ungrateful*?"
 - 1. I have everything that I've *wanted*, or at least a lot more than a lot of *other* people...
 - 2. but here I *am* / *moping* around. What's *wrong* with me?"
 - iii. And then to make things *worse*,
 - 1. there's that midlife realization of *mortality*:
 - a. "Sure, I got to the top of my *ladder*,
 - b. but what's the *point* / if I'm going to die *anyway*?"
 - 2. Or maybe a less *morbid* version:
 - a. "How can I be *happy*, if it's not going to *last*?"
 - b. If *tomorrow*, I know that *life* / will just feel *stale* again?"
- b. So *what* does / the Gospel *say* to this?
 - i. Well, I think in *some* cases / the Gospel *reminds* us
 - 1. that only the Kingdom of *God* is strong enough / to satisfy our need for *joy* / and *purpose* / and *identity*.
 - 2. And so if our lives are feeling *stale*, it *could* be
 - a. that we've been pursuing *false* kingdoms,
 - b. kingdoms that are not *God's*, and *therefore* / just can't *satisfy*.
 - ii. But I *want* to suggest / that not *every* bout of midlife dissatisfaction / is because of some *idolatry*.
 - 1. There's *substantial* research that shows / that *all* else being equal, the *human* experience of happiness / follows a *U-curve*.
 - a. Again, all else being *equal*, people in their young *adult* years / tend to start off *happy*,
 - b. but then as they enter their 40s and 50s, hit a *bottom*.
 - c. The *good* news, however, is that for the decades *after* that,
 - i. their happiness not only *rises*,
 - ii. but can even *exceed* / the happiness of their *youth*.

2. Now, the world has posed *all* sorts of possible explanations for this “happiness curve,”
 - a. ranging from *neurochemistry*
 - b. to social *evolution*.
 3. But *what* if / it’s *all* just part / of how God has *wired* us?
 - a. I mean, doesn’t it sound like something *God* would do
 - i. that at the *peak* of productivity and strength for most people,
 - ii. he should sow a seed of *dissatisfaction*, a *desire* / for something *more*?
 - b. In those *very* years / when the world would *tell* us, “*Look*, you have it *all*!” doesn’t it sound like *God*
 - i. that we should hear *another* voice saying,
 - ii. “But is this all there *is*?”
 - iii. *Sometimes* midlife dissatisfaction / is the result of *idolatry*; and if *that’s* the case, then we need to *repent*.
 - iv. But *sometimes* midlife dissatisfaction / is simply the Holy Spirit *reminding* us / that we’re not *home* yet.
- c. Now, *one* day, Jesus will *return*, and he will bring our heavenly home *with* him. But in the *meantime*, what we are *invited* to do / is *wait* / with *patience*.
- i. *That* probably feels / like the *last* thing we want to do, doesn’t it? But I want to *suggest*
 1. that our impatience probably has *less* to do / with something holy of *God*,
 2. and *more* to do / with how Amazon or Netflix or a bunch of *other* companies / want to profit off our *desire* / for instant *gratification*.
 - ii. If love is *patient*, and God wants us to grow in *love*,
 1. then it should come as no *surprise*
 - a. that our journey with God will *bring* us
 - b. through a season in which *all* we can do / is *wait* / with *patience*.
 - i. After *all*, we’ve already done everything *else*, right?
 - ii. We’ve already climbed to the top of our *ladders*!
 2. What I’m *suggesting*, then, is that in *some* cases, midlife *dissatisfaction* / is *actually* / part of the *process*.
 - iii. And if *that’s* the case, then what the Gospel calls us *do* / is simply *sit* / in our *dissatisfaction*.
 1. Stop *beating* ourselves up / for not being more *grateful*.
 2. Stop trying to *stimulate* our lives / out of the *staleness*.
 3. Stop expecting that *God* / should give us our best lives *now*.
 4. *Instead*, simply / *wait*... and *trust*.
 - iv. That may not be a very satisfying *answer*, but that’s *precisely* / the *point*.
- d. What the *Gospel* says / to midlife *dissatisfaction*. Conduct poll for second main point?

V. Topic 4: The Gospel and midlife disappointment

- a. One of the defining struggles of midlife that we've talked about / is the *deep* disappointment that comes / when you're trying to climb the ladder of your *life*, but you hit midlife and *realize*, "I may *never* / get to the *top*."
 - i. So imagine in your *high* school years, being asked to write an *essay* / about what you think your life will be like in *20 years*.
 - 1. And maybe you talk about the kind of *job* you'll have / and the impact it'll make in the *world*,
 - 2. or the kind of *family* you'll have / and how your kids will grow *up*,
 - 3. or where you'll be *living*, or the kinds of things you'll be *doing*.
 - 4. You *dream*.
 - ii. And whether it's in that *high* school assignment / or elsewhere down the *road*, your *dream* / becomes an *identity*:
 - 1. "I've *always* seen myself as a ____."
 - 2. Or, "I don't feel like I can be fully who I'm meant to *be* / unless I get to be a ____."
 - iii. But *then* at midlife,
 - 1. we realize we're getting *older*, and there's only so much *time* left,
 - 2. and we *still* haven't become / who we've always thought we would *be*,
 - 3. and... well... maybe we *won't* get to become / who we've *always* thought we would be.
 - 4. And *now* what?
 - iv. And *that's* when / the disappointment sinks *in*.
- b. Now, there are different *flavors* to disappointment.
 - i. One flavor / is the *disappointment* / of not being *great*.
 - ii. And you know who you *are*.
 - 1. For *your* high school assignment,
 - a. you dreamed big dreams about *accomplishment* / and being *known* / and making a *difference* in the world.
 - b. And it didn't *hurt* / that everyone kept telling you about all the *potential* you had.
 - c. And *sure*,
 - i. you know that you're not supposed to be *arrogant*;
 - ii. you know that Jesus cares about *humility*.
 - d. But *still*, you've always *seen* yourself / as being someone *great*.
 - 2. But now it's *midlife*,
 - a. and you're *not* in that place of greatness,
 - b. and no one is *talking* with you / about your *potential* anymore.

- iii. *What does the Gospel / say to you?*
 - 1. *Jesus – our wonderful King – came not to be served, but to serve / and to be a ransom for many.*
 - a. The one whose Kingdom you *belong* to
 - b. has opened a *new* way to greatness,
 - c. and it's by *being* / the *least* / and the *servant* of all.
 - 2. Now,
 - a. this is *not* meant / to create a new *ladder* to climb,
 - i. as if *now* the goal
 - ii. is just to be better than everyone else at being *humble*.
 - b. *Rather*, what it's *meant* to do / is simply do away with *ladders*.
 - 3. The *point* / is that *greatness*
 - a. is not something to be achieved by our *efforts*,
 - b. but it is something to be *received* / as a gracious gift from *God*.
 - 4. And if you are in *Christ*, then that *gift* / is for *you*!
 - a. For if you are in *Christ*, God *sees* you
 - i. as his beloved *child*,
 - ii. as his good and faithful *servant*,
 - iii. as an object of his *mercy* / destined for *glory*!
 - b. Because of *Christ*, you already *are* / *great* / in the eyes of *God*!
- iv. And *that* / is what the Gospel says to *you*!
- c. But there's *another* flavor to disappointment,
 - i. and *this* one / doesn't have to do with wanting to be *great*, but *wanting* / certain *relationships*.
 - 1. It's *wanting* to have / a certain kind of *parenting* relationship / or *romantic* relationship / or *friendship* circle, and *so forth*.
 - 2. But now it's *midlife*, and instead of having that *relationship*, you only have *loss* / or *hurt* / or *hopelessness*.
 - ii. *What does the Gospel say / to you* in this moment?
 - 1. It'll be *alright*?
 - a. *True*, but that may not be the truth to say / for this *moment*.
 - 2. God has a *plan*?
 - a. *Also* true, but *also* may not be the truth to say / for this *moment*.
 - 3. You shouldn't have been chasing those dreams *anyway*?
 - a. *Well*, *that* one seems a bit harsh.

- iii. *Instead*, I think the *gracious* truth / that the Gospel has for us in *this* moment / is *this*: “And *Jesus* / *wept*.”
 - 1. *Remember* the story of Mary and Martha at the tomb of their brother Lazarus?
 - a. *They* too / had a *relationship* dream –
 - b. a *dream* / of continuing to have their *brother* / in their *lives*.
 - 2. But by the time Jesus shows *up*,
 - a. it’s already four days too *late*.
 - b. And now instead of having their *brother*, all they *have* / is *loss* / and *hurt* / and *hopelessness*.
 - 3. So what does Jesus *do*?
 - a. *Well*, Jesus *knows* / that he will raise Lazarus from the dead that very *hour*;
 - i. he knows that everything will be *alright*
 - ii. and that God has a *plan*.
 - b. But telling the *sisters* that / isn’t what he *does*.
 - c. *Instead*, what he does / is he *weeps*.
 - 4. And his *tears* / are *tears* / of shared *grief*, of *empathy*.
 - a. Because Jesus *too* / *understands* / *loss* / and *hurt* / and *hopelessness*.
 - b. He *too* knows what it’s like
 - i. to want God to do something so very *badly*,
 - ii. and yet *God* / doesn’t *do* it.
 - c. For not too long *later*
 - i. he *too* would be praying / *ever* so fervently / for the Father to *spare* him from the cross,
 - ii. and yet to the *cross* / he still *went*.
- iv. *Point*:
 - 1. Those at Lazarus’ tomb who *understood* Jesus / saw his *tears*, and were able to *say*, “See how he *loved* him!”
 - 2. And the *same* is true / for those of us at *midlife* / struggling with *relational* disappointment:
 - a. Jesus *weeps* with you;
 - b. *see* / how he *loves* you!
- d. What the *Gospel* says / to *midlife* / *disappointment*. Conduct poll for second main point?

VI. *The same Gospel, applied to midlife*

a. *Transition:*

- i. So that was the “choose your own *adventure*” part of today’s sermon.
- ii. Now, I want to wrap *up* the series / by making a few *final* observations / about the *Gospel* / and spiritual *formation* / and *midlife*.
- b. You *may* remember / from the *first* sermon in this series / that we talked about the book of *Ecclesiastes*.
 - i. And we saw that *much* of that Old Testament book / is the *extended* lament / of a man named *Qohelet*.
 1. He’s *lamenting*
 - a. his profound realization of *mortality* / and *limitation*,
 - b. which leads *into* / his deep *disappointment* / and *dissatisfaction*,
 - c. and all of this *results* in / the disillusionment and disorientation that *follows*.
 2. In *other* words, *Qohelet* / sounds a *lot* like someone / in the *throes* of midlife.
 - ii. But then the *final* section of the book / is the *narrator* of Ecclesiastes / speaking words of *evaluation*.
 1. He has *listened* / to *all* that Qohelet has to say, and now he *tells* us / how to *interpret* it.
 2. Now we’ve already seen how the narrator *affirms* what Qohelet has to say,
 - a. and that he believes that Qohelet’s words are *wise*,
 - b. and can be used by God to shepherd his *people*.
 3. But *then* the narrator / says *one* more thing, and this is about as *close* to a prescription / or a bit of *counsel* that we’ll find / in *all* of Ecclesiastes, and it’s *this*:
 - a. For *those* who are in the throes / of the *struggles* of midlife, *this* / is what you need to *do*...
 - b. you *ready* for it?
 - i. “*Fear* God / and keep his *commandments*, for *this* / is the whole duty of *man*.”
 - ii. That’s *it*. *Fear* God / and keep his *commandments*.
 - iii. So what does that *mean*?
 1. Well, if you’re familiar with the Old *Testament*, then you *know* / that this is not a new thing to *say*.
 - a. In *fact*, you see it repeated several times *throughout* the Old Testament,
 - b. and *especially* / in *Deuteronomy*.
 2. In *other* words, the narrator’s *prescription* / for those in *midlife* / is *nothing* / *new*.
 - a. It’s the *same* prescription / for the *people* of God
 - b. from *generation* to generation, of *all* ages / and *stages*.

- c. And I point this *out*
 - i. because *maybe* when you heard that this was going to be a sermon series about midlife,
 - 1. you thought there might be something *new* about the Gospel
 - 2. that could *speak* to you / in your *current* struggles.
 - ii. But now that we're five weeks *in* / and at the *end* of this series,
 - 1. you've probably *noticed* / that I *haven't* said anything new about the Gospel.
 - a. Jesus is *King*? Learned that in *Sunday* School.
 - b. God's grace is *sufficient*? *Middle* School.
 - c. New identity in *Christ*? *High* school.
 - d. Jesus can *comfort* us in our grief / because he's gone through grief *himself*? *College*.
 - 2. *Come on*, Jason, we've already *heard* all this before!
 - iii. *Thank you*. I take that as a *sign* / that I've been doing my *job*. Because there *is* no new Gospel / that we need to hear at *midlife*.
 - 1. In the *same* way
 - a. that the *Old* Testament imperative to fear God and keep his commandments
 - b. was repeated to *Qohelet*,
 - 2. so the one and *only* / *life*-giving good news / about Jesus and his *Kingdom*
 - a. is what we *New* Testament people need to hear
 - b. *also*...
 - c. *regardless* of what age or stage / we might be in.
 - iv. In *other* words, it's *supposed* to be / that there's *nothing* new to hear.
- d. *But* / for those *deep* / in the *struggles* of midlife, *perhaps* there's something here / that's *supposed* to be / *renewed*.
 - i. Many of us have *heard* / about how Jesus will one day *raise* us from the dead / to be *with* him.
 - 1. But I *wonder* – for those of us who have *profoundly* realized our own mortality –
 - 2. I wonder if that *hope* of resurrection / is now so much more *meaningful* to us.
 - ii. Many of us have *heard* before / that Jesus is in *control*, and he can take even the *worst* situations / and redeem them for his good *purposes*.
 - 1. But I *wonder* – for those of us who have experienced that deep *bitterness* / of feeling *trapped* by a life we regret –
 - 2. I wonder if that promise of *redemption* / is now so much more *precious* to us.
 - iii. And so on it *goes*.

- iv. For *many* of us,
 - 1. *midlife* / is a time when we are *profoundly* met / by our *limitations* / and *regrets* / and *dissatisfactions* / and *disappointments*.
 - 2. But that is *precisely* why / *midlife* is *also* a time / when we can be *profoundly* met / by our *good* / and wonderful *King*...
 - a. who doesn't proclaim to us a *new* Gospel for a new stage in life,
 - b. but who instead *proclaims* to us / the *same* Gospel / that we might be *renewed* / through *every* / stage of *life*.

VII. Conclusion

- a. *This* is why our culture / gets it *wrong* about *midlife*.
 - i. It's *not* / "all *downhill* from here." It's *not*, "say goodbye to the best *years* of your life."
 - ii. *Rather*, *midlife* can be a *time* / of *immense* spiritual formation. It can be a rich *season* / of the Holy Spirit forming *our* spirits / into the image of *Christ*!
 - 1. For it's *precisely* / through the *struggles* / that we become more like Jesus in beautiful *ways*.
 - a. It's precisely through the *struggles* / of *limitation* / and *regret* / and *dissatisfaction* / and *disappointment*
 - b. that we *cultivate*
 - i. a more resilient *joy*, a more anchored sense of *self*, a deeper *security* in God's love,
 - ii. a more forgiving *spirit*, a greater *rest* in his good purposes, a more *patient* approach to life,
 - iii. a greater certainty of *hope* / that God has *more* for us than just this lifetime,
 - iv. and a more profound *experience* / of his *comfort*.
 - 2. And I *mean*, who *wouldn't* want to become like that?
 - a. *Joyful*, *anchored*, *secure*, *forgiving*, at *rest*, *patient*,
 - b. *hopeful*, a person of *comfort*?
 - iii. You know, if you *look* for them, you'll *find*
 - 1. that there *are* people / who have journeyed *well* through *midlife* –
 - a. seasoned not only by the *years*,
 - b. but also by the *Gospel*.
 - c. And *some* of them / are here at *City Line*!
 - 2. And you can tell when you're *with* them.
 - a. They move *slower*,
 - i. but not necessarily because they're *older*;
 - ii. but *more* because
 - 1. they don't have to *grasp* anymore
 - 2. or hurry around to *prove* themselves.
 - iii. They know they have the *Kingdom*.

- b. They are *quieter*,
 - i. but not because they don't know what to *say*;
 - ii. but simply because they're no longer *anxious*
 - 1. to say something *impressive*,
 - 2. or to fill the awkward *silence*.
 - iii. They know they're loved by *Jesus*.
 - c. They are more *measured* in their responses now,
 - i. but not because they don't care about right and *wrong*;
 - ii. but simply because they *know*
 - 1. that responding too *rashly*
 - 2. can very often produce its *own* wrong.
 - iii. And they know that the *King* / cares more than any of *us* do, and he *always* / responds *rightly*.
 - d. *Now*, this is *not* to say / that these people never *sin*, or that they never *suffer*.
 - i. In *fact*, they may be *more* aware of their sin and suffering / than ever *before*.
 - ii. *But* / they hold it *differently* now.
 - iii. For they know that their *King* has *forgiven* them,
 - iv. and it will not be *long* / before their *every* tear / is wiped *away*.
 - 3. *These* / are the *heroes* of the faith,
 - a. the "many *brothers* and sisters" / who will *stand* with Jesus one day
 - i. when he *returns* in glory
 - ii. as the *firstborn* / of us *all*.
 - b. And they *got* to that point
 - i. not because they *avoided* the struggles of midlife / or were *spared* such things,
 - ii. but because they went *through* them
 - 1. with *Jesus* / as their good *shepherd*,
 - 2. *guiding* them / with the *Gospel*.
 - 4. And *that* / is how you and *I* will get there / *too*.
 - iv. *Midlife* – what an opportunity / for spiritual *formation*!
- b. So that's *it*. That's our *Lenten* sermon series / on *spiritual* formation / at *midlife*.
 - i. *Next* week, we'll have a Palm *Sunday* sermon, and then it'll be *Easter*!
 - ii. But just because it's the end of the *sermon* series / *doesn't* mean / it's the end of the *conversation*.
 - 1. Many Christian *authors* about midlife / have *noted* / that churches often aren't very *good* at addressing midlife issues.
 - 2. And there are a ton of *reasons* for that, but one of the *main* ones / is that we just don't *talk* about it.
 - iii. *My hope* / is that this *sermon* series / is not the *end* of the conversation, but a *catalyst* / for *further* conversation and reflection / *together*.

- c. *Related* to that, later *today*, I'll be sending out to the church *email* list / a link to a *follow-up* questionnaire / about this *sermon* series.
 - i. I mentioned this last week during the *announcements*,
 - 1. but this *questionnaire* / is part of *research* that I'm doing / for my Doctorate of *Ministry* program.
 - 2. The questionnaire is *online*, it's *anonymous*, and it's about 20 minutes *long*.
 - ii. I'd *love* it / if you'd take some time *this* week / to fill it *out*... even if you weren't able to do the *baseline* questionnaire.
 - 1. Your input is *valuable* to me,
 - 2. and the questionnaire *itself* is designed
 - a. to help you *process* some more of the things we talked about / in the *series*...
 - b. so I think it will be valuable to you as *well*!
- d. And then *finally*, the *end* of the questionnaire / will ask if you'd be interested in being part of a *one* hour Zoom focus group / to discuss *spiritual* formation during midlife / even *further*.
 - i. This is the *last* step in my research, and I'm looking for 6 to 10 people / to *participate*.
 - ii. But don't *worry*;
 - 1. it will be run as a *discussion*,
 - 2. not as me just *preaching* to you!
 - iii. So if you're someone who'd like to *talk* more / about *anything* we've discussed in the last five weeks, this would be a great place to *do* that.
 - iv. Those who indicate *interest* in being part of the focus group,
 - 1. I will reach *out* to you,
 - 2. and then we'll schedule the *meeting*!

Alright. That's it. Let's pray together.

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